

Review of *The Buddhist Sects of Japan*

by E. Steinilber-Oberlin

I am in love with this book. It was published by Allen and Unwin in 1938. The date is important considering the parallel studies in Eliot, Takakusu, Suzuki, etc.

The author follows the traditional method of discussing the sects in historical order rather than from the practical point of view used by Eliot. He is very sympathetic and almost pulls you along with him. There is no doubt a danger in that you seem won over to each sect in turn, even those which for some reason or other seem antagonistic or incomplete. There is, however, a strong feeling for the spirit of Dai Nippon throughout, almost as if each sect and sub-sect were trying to re-enact a cosmic drama or paint cosmic pictures, with the expected human failings in so doing. From my point of view it is quite proper.

This book is being considered from the standpoint that the Tibetans have confused the groups in their explanation of the divisions of the Wheel-of-the-law. All the Japanese schools—and some material will be quoted, with or without discussion—offer views in harmony with my own thesis.

All the sects will not be discussed. Texts from one of them are included in the direct discussion and others are printed in an appendix. Hosso is interesting, because if the texts used in study; these include Lankaravata and Avatamsaka. Kegon concentrates on the latter which, from my point of view, is superior to the Saddharma-Pundarika in size, loftiness, literary style and presumable aim, but from the finalistic standpoint, any sort of competition is unworthy. Either may be used as a crutch, and has been, through the ages.

The humanistic note is introduced in Kegon and one finds it emphasized by quite a number of sects, in particular Tendai. From the ultimate standpoint I see no difference between **ji-ji-mu-ge** and **tat twam asi**—that all “things” in the universe partake of the same essence and are Unseparate. But the Japanese note of humanism is constantly stressed by the author as against Indian pessimism. When one combines that with the study of modern Indian problems, one almost concludes that India needs an influx of Japanese teachings, not only in technology but in art and philosophy. I see no greater philosophers in the world than some of the contemporary or near contemporary Indians, but the Japanese say the same thing and sometimes in short verses for what the others require long books—with further destruction of vegetation to provide the necessary materials.

Steinilber-Oberlin then offers a translation of sections of **Kegonkyo** (Avatamsaka Sutra). While it is not clear as to the details of these translations, from what language to what and by whom, the spirit is so marvelous that for the purpose of these studies it can be fully accepted.

“This I have heard:

When the only Honored One of the World reached Illumination, in the forest of Uruvilva, in the Land of Maghada, the trees with their trunks, their branches and their leaves, were transformed by his miraculous virtue and became seven, precious jewels, and shone brilliantly. From his Lion-Throne a bright light radiated upon the ten regions of the Universe which it illuminated in all its parts, like an immense cloud of gold.

At this moment the wisdom of the Unique Honored One of the World appeared as deep as the oceans, as extended as space. And before its light the darkness of the world vanished, and all sentient creatures were led along the road which leads to Illumination.

And the whole Universe, and all that was contained in Himself, was reflected in His Spirit with a perfect lucidity and serenity, as the starry skies are reflected in a perfectly calm sea. Innumerable Bodhisattvas, Devas and Genii were assembled around the Unique Honored One of the World, and inspired by his miraculous power, each celebrated His merits in a song." p. 64

No end of volumes of commentary can satisfy us with regard to this passage. The best comes from a very popular phrase of the day: "**This is it,**" I feel impelled here to add a few personal notes before going on with the main purpose of these writings.

Kenneth Saunders, more than anyone else, introduced me to Buddhist Art. This was prior to the "conversion" of my old friend and teacher, the late Perham Nahl of the University of California, so that later on Nahl and I were very close indeed. When Saunders wrote his *A Gospel for Asia* I felt he had outlived his usefulness. No scientist would dare to offer the world a treatise unless he or his confreres has some direct experience; but in the literary world connected with theosophy and mysticism this is different. The best analogue to "Saddharma Pundarika" is the Gnostic "Pistis Sophia," and the best parallel (for me) to "Bhagavad Gita" is this "Avatamsaka Sutra." But I fail to find anything in the Bible or **astika** Indian literature which is superior to the above as seeking to offer in literary form something of the experience of illumination, or spiritual emancipation.

In the years 1930-31 I was living, part of the time, in a section of Fairfax in Marin County known as Deer Park, and there, of all places, Mrs. Elise Norwood, still in the flesh, had a vision almost identical with the above. She had revealed it to me in detail. The next day I visited San Francisco to attend a Tea Ceremony given at the local Zendo by a visiting Masters Rev. Gido Ishida. Very much moved by the ceremony I wanted to pay respects to Ishida-san. For two weeks I was in a semi-ecstasy between the ceremony and Mrs. Norwood's vision and then wrote the Gathas: "Parinirvana Day," attached. Ishida-san was so delighted he performed another ceremony for me alone.

The one phrase I wish to refer to is in the last paragraph above: "**Bodhisattvas, Devas and Genii...**," as they, to me represent the grades higher than the human or manushic level. This would equate **Genii** to the Tibetan—not the Indian—**Asura**. It is curious that the word **Genius** (pl. **Genii**) is perhaps philological the same as the Arabic **Jinn** (pl. **Janoun**) and has been used in two senses: (a) To represent the stage higher than the human level which I posit as Gandharva or Pitra (India) and Sravaka or Samara (Buddhist). (b) To represent in a generic sense all un-illuminated beings of the subtle or other non-material spheres. Thus we have then Asura as a generic term including the benign Gandharvas as well as the unwholesome Asuras per se; and Jinn including the benign **Peri** (Same in Iranian as Pitra is in Sanskrit—cp. words for "father") also including the wholesome **Mareed** and **Afrit**.

The **Afrit**, I am inclined to believe, is the same as the **preta** both functionally and philologically while the **mareed** is parallel to the **asura** per se.

After the above passage the author gives us a number of (to me) most profound and magnificent gathic hymns, the first of which is repeated:

"The First Devaraja sang thus:
The Tathagata is mingled in space
With the infinite and spiritual universe,

Eternally calm and inaccessible to trouble
He Himself has appeared upon the earth
To become the dwelling where reside all things.
He has appeared on earth
To enforce the reign of the Good Law,
And spiritual light knows no longer any limits,
And by His light He dispels the passions of sentient beings
And dispenses ineffable joy to them." p. 64

One more portion of Kegon-kyo is quoted, which appears in the appendix, on p. 288:

"The sage who has destroyed the causes of ignorance
Holds high above him the torch of intelligence,
Or builds the Arch of the divine Law,
Or edified the Bridge of the Law.
Over which he carries all that must be carried
Across the Ocean of Birth and Death."

It is interesting to note here that exactly the same symbolism was used by Mohammed in reference to Jesus. In Islam this bridge is called **Sirat** and it is said to be the thickness of a camel's hair suspended over an unfathomable abyss, yet leading to Divine Paradise. Thus, in a sense, it corresponds to the "pearly gate."

Passing on to the Shingon Sect, one passage of a conversation is given (p. 96):

"This arrangement is found all over the world, in the deeper aspects of all religions." The book continues immediately: "Dharmakara was the greatest and most remarkable amongst this last group. He considered himself absolutely **at one** with all the creatures of the Universe, and believed that no individual perfection can be reached if one does not strive at the same time to perfect others. This signifies in other words, that, in order to reach infinite mercy, supreme wisdom and power, these qualities must be incarnated in the person of a Redeptor." (ibid. p. 225)

Quoting from **Sukhavativyuha** in the Appendix, one reads:

"... Then Dharmakara spake thus:

1. O Bhagavad, if in my land of Buddha there should be Hell, or Birth as it exists in the animal kingdom, in the kingdom of departed spirits, or the body of Acura, then may I never obtain perfect omniscience (Literal translation: the highest perfect knowledge)." pp. 289-90.

Although one does not have the Sanskrit here, there is a strong probability that Hell is given for **naraka**, the **tirthaga-yoni** or **raksha** for animal kingdom, the **preta** for departed spirits. But what is to be noted again that here the term **Asura** applies to a lower or sub-kingdom, below, not above the degree of manhood, as in the theme to be submitted.