

Burnouf and the Birth of Buddhist Studies

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IN ACCOUNTS of the European encounter with Buddhism, it is customary to begin with the few references in classical sources, such as the statement by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) that “Among the Indians are some who follow the precepts of Boutta, whom for his exceptional sanctity, they have honored as a god.” A millennium later, we find the surprisingly positive account of the life of Sagamoni Borcan by Marco Polo (1254–1324). In the sixteenth century, there are the negative comments about Buddhism made by St. Francis Xavier (1506–1552) in Japan and by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) in China. However, it is generally accepted that the academic study of Buddhism, what the Jesuit scholar, Cardinal Henri de Lubac called *la découverte scientifique*, did not begin until the nineteenth century.¹ And there, the towering figure is Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852). He is regarded, I believe correctly, as the founding father of our field. In my remarks today, I would like to discuss why this is the case, and consider how a book by a man who died over a century and a half ago continues to silently influence our work today.

Let me begin with a brief account of his life, or at least his life up to the year 1844. He was born in Paris in 1801, the son of the distinguished classicist and translator of Tacitus, Jean-Louis Burnouf (1775–1844). Burnouf *père* had been among the first group of French scholars to study Sanskrit after the visit of the Scottish captain of the East India Company, Alexander

¹ Urs App (2010) has shown, however, that much important scholarship on Buddhism was produced by Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See also Lopez 2013.

Hamilton, who had been arrested in France (along with 1,180 other British males between the ages of eighteen and sixty) when Napoleon broke the Treaty of Amiens in 1803. Burnouf *films* was instructed in Sanskrit, along with Greek and Latin, by his father before continuing his Sanskrit studies with Antoine Leonard de Chézy (1773–1832), the first occupant of the chair in Sanskrit language and literature at the Collège de France.

On or around 20 April 1837, twenty-four Sanskrit manuscripts of Buddhist texts arrived in Paris, sent seven months before by Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800?–1894), British resident at the Court of Nepal. On 5 June 1837, Burnouf wrote to Hodgson, explaining that the Société Asiatique had instructed him and Eugène Jacquet (1811–1838) to examine the volumes. They divided the books between them and began reading. Burnouf was initially put off by the first text he read, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, “because I saw only perpetual repetitions of the advantages and merits promised to those who obtain *prajñāpāramitā*. But what is this *prajñā* itself? This is what I did not see anywhere, and what I wished to learn.”² He continued reading.

I turned to a new book, one of the nine *dharma*s, the *Saddharma pundarīka*, and I can promise you that I have not repented my choice. Since about 25 April, I have without reserve devoted every moment that I could steal from my occupations as professor of Sanskrit and academician to this work, of which I have already read rather considerable portions. You will not be surprised that I did not understand everything; the material is very new for me, the style as well as the content. But I intend to reread, with pen in hand, your excellent memoranda in the *Asiatic Researches* of London and Calcutta, as well as the *Journal* of Prinsep. Though many things are still obscure to my eyes, I nevertheless comprehend the progression of the book, the mode of exposition of the author, and I have even already translated two chapters in their entirety, omitting nothing. These are two parables, not lacking in interest, but which are especially curious specimens of the manner in which the teaching of the Buddhists is imparted and of the discursive and very Socratic method of exposition. . . . I confess to you that I am passionate about this reading, and that I would like to have more time and health to attend to it day and night. I will not, however, set aside the *Saddharma* without extracting and

² Feer 1899, pp. 157–58.

translating substantial fragments, convinced that there is nothing I could better do to recognize your liberality than to communicate to the scholars of Europe part of the riches that you have so liberally placed at our disposal. I will exert myself in that until this winter, and I will try to dig up some printer in Germany to bring out an *Analysis or Observations on the Saddharma pundarīka*.³

This “Analysis” or “Observations” on the *Lotus Sutra* would evolve over the next seven years. In a letter of 28 October 1841, Burnouf wrote to Hodgson that he has finished printing his translation of the *Lotus Sutra*, “but I would like to give an introduction to this bizarre work.”⁴ Three years later, in 1844, he would publish a book with the modest title, *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien*.

Burnouf’s translation of the *Lotus Sutra* would not be published until after he died. He delayed the publication because he felt that it would not be comprehensible to European readers without an introduction. That introduction grew to become a 647-page work. Or, to be more precise, that work, whose title page reads “Tome Premier,” represents what Burnouf envisioned as the first volume of that introduction. As he explains, he intended at least one, and perhaps as many as three more volumes (depending on what he means by “memorandum”). The first volume is devoted to the Buddhist literature of Nepal, preserved in Sanskrit. The second volume, which he says would have five sections, would be devoted to the Buddhist literature of Sri Lanka, preserved in Pali. This study would be followed by another memorandum comparing the Sanskrit collection of Nepal with the Pali collection of Sri Lanka. Finally, he would compose another memorandum, in six sections, that would analyze various traditions on the date of the Buddha’s death and then go on to examine the fate of Buddhism in India after his death as well as the various periods of the emigration of Buddhism from India to other regions of Asia. Burnouf alludes repeatedly to these various subsequent memoranda in the first volume, suggesting that he fully intended to complete them all, a fact confirmed by the many translations from the Pali found among his papers after his death.

The only book on Buddhism that he would live to publish was *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien*, which appeared in Paris in 1844. It

³ Feer 1899, pp. 158–59. For a very useful study of Burnouf’s work on the *Saddharmapundarīka*, see Eugène Burnouf: *The Background to his Research into the Lotus Sutra* (Yuyama 2000).

⁴ Feer 1899, p. 174.

is the first scholarly monograph on Buddhism to be published in Europe, although it had been preceded in 1836 by the important and largely forgotten translation, with many lengthy annotations, of the *Foguoji* 仏国記 of Faxian 法顯 (c. 320–c. 420) by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832). Yet Burnouf’s book, as well as the others that he intended to write before he published his translation of the *Lotus Sutra*, tell us a great deal about Burnouf’s view of Buddhism, a view that would become our own. As we consider the contribution of Burnouf to the question at the heart of this symposium, the question of modernity and Buddhism, we might classify his contribution under four headings, each ending with the suffix *ization*: Indianization, Sanskritization, Textualization, and Humanization.

Indianization

In the third sentence on the first page of the 647 pages in Burnouf’s *Introduction*, he declares, “The belief to which the name Buddhism was given, after that of its founder, is entirely Indian.” The French is even more emphatic; he calls Buddhism *un fait complètement indien*, “a completely Indian fact.” In some ways, this statement seems so obvious today that it does not merit mention. But in the immediately preceding decades, there had been much debate about the Buddha’s place of origin, with Egypt being proposed by many. As we know, Buddhism had disappeared from India centuries before, such that prior to Burnouf, European knowledge of Buddhism in India had come largely from Brahmins, who described the Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Viṣṇu, sometimes with approbation, sometimes with scorn. Statues of the Buddha had been identified in the cave temples of India, and inferences about his teachings had been drawn from them by such figures as William Erskine (1773–1852). Burnouf, in declaring Buddhism to be entirely Indian, was therefore seeking to dispel the various odd theories that had circulated for centuries about the origins of the Buddha and his teachings.

Yet Burnouf did not simply say that Buddhism began in India; he put it much more forcefully, calling Buddhism “a completely Indian fact.” By the time that he published the *Introduction*, Burnouf had already produced large volumes of translation of the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, and he knew the Indian classics well. For Burnouf, Buddhism could only be understood within the context of this literature—philosophical and religious—and the culture that produced it. Previous attempts to understand Buddhism had been drawn from sources from elsewhere in Asia, and in the opinion of the first scholar to publish a substantial review of Burnouf’s *Introduction*, these attempts had not met with success. In his review in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*

of Bengal in 1845, Eduard Röer (1805–1866) surveyed European knowledge of Buddhism, noting that the initial understanding of Buddhism in Europe had come from “secondary sources,” that is, works in Chinese, Burmese, and Mongolian, leading him to observe, “Our first acquaintance with Buddhism was in fact not a kind to invite research; the mixture of extravagant fables, apparent historical facts, philosophical and religious doctrines was so monstrous, that it seemed to defy every attempt to unravel it.”⁵ Burnouf, however, drew from Indian sources; he drew from Sanskrit.

Sanskritization

By the time that Burnouf published his *Introduction*, the Sanskrit craze in Europe had been in full swing for some decades, set off in part by the declaration of Sir William Jones (1746–1794) to the Asiatick Society of Bengal in Calcutta on 2 February 1786:

The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed that no philologist could examine them all three without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.⁶

The first chair in Sanskrit studies in Europe had been established in Paris in 1814. When its first occupant, Chézy, died in a cholera epidemic in 1832, Burnouf was appointed to succeed him, working on a number of editions and translations of Hindu texts, while continuing his work in Avestan. Although the leading scholars of the day agreed that Buddhism was of Indian origin, they had no Buddhist texts from India, only Buddhist texts from the countries into which, it was believed, Buddhism had been banished by the Brahmins: China, Japan, Tartary, Tibet, Ceylon, Ava, Pegu, and Siam. Then, in 1837, Hodgson’s dispatch arrived in Paris and Burnouf began reading Buddhist sutras and śāstras, in Sanskrit. In the first chapter of the *Introduction*, he makes a long argument for the importance of reading Buddhist texts in the language in which they were originally composed, noting what is lost, both in nuance and in meaning, when Sanskrit texts are translated from

⁵ Röer 1845, p. 783.

⁶ Jones 1806, pp. 422–23. This is the London reprint of the original Calcutta edition.

Tibetan, for example. Burnouf's argument would prove compelling and, despite the relative dearth of Buddhist texts preserved in Sanskrit, Sanskrit would become the *linga franca* of Buddhist studies.

Burnouf was not only dedicated to Sanskrit; he was dedicated to good Sanskrit, and it is the quality of the Sanskrit that was a key criterion for his distinction between what he calls "simple sutras" and "developed sutras." The simple sutras, written in good Sanskrit with relatively little verse, represented for Burnouf the original teachings of the Buddha. (Burnouf found this good Sanskrit in texts like the *Divyāvadāna* and the *Avadānaśataka*.) The Sanskrit of the developed sutras, what we would call the Mahayana sutras, and especially the Sanskrit of the tantras, Burnouf found to be barbaric, particularly the verses, leading him to conclude that they were written by monks who did not know Sanskrit well. For Burnouf, this was a sign of their temporal, and perhaps even spatial, distance from the Buddha. These works must have been written long after the Buddha's death, and perhaps after Buddhism had been driven from India, depriving their authors of proper instruction in Sanskrit grammar. This view of a pure origin followed by inevitable decay as one moves farther and farther from the source would come to play a significant role in the European representation of the Buddha and the fate of his teachings.

Textualization

Prior to the time of Burnouf, most European knowledge about Buddhism had been gained from "the field," so to speak, that is, by Europeans living in Buddhist lands. The information they acquired in most cases seems to have come from conversations with members of the local populace. One thinks here of Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1716), who taught his Japanese assistant on Dejima to speak Dutch. When something was read by Europeans, it was often a summary prepared especially on their behalf, such as the accounts of Buddhism in Chinese prepared for the Jesuit fathers by their Christian converts. In rare, and important cases, Europeans learned to read texts in classical Buddhist languages and worked closely with learned monks to discern their meaning. One of the first to do so was Ippolito Desideri (1684–1733) in Lhasa, although because of the subsequent suppression of the Jesuits, his work would not come to light until the twentieth century. In the decades just prior to the publication of Burnouf's *Introduction*, the Transylvanian traveler Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842) was surveying the contents of the Tibetan *bka' 'gyur* with a Tibetan lama in Ladakh, the Dutch Moravian missionary Isaak Jakob Schmidt (1779–1847) was translating the *Diamond*

Sutra from Tibetan into German with the assistance of monks in Kalmykia, and the British colonial officer George Turnour (1799–1843) was reading the *Mahāvāṃsa* with Theravada elders in Sri Lanka. It is clear in each of these cases that these scholars would not have been able to decipher the works they were reading without the assistance of learned Buddhist scholars, assistance that they usually acknowledged.

With Burnouf, things were very different. He only left France twice in his life, going to Germany and to England for his research. He never met a Buddhist. His approach was to read the texts that he had received, texts that he was well trained to read because of his excellent knowledge of Sanskrit, and then seek to discern their meaning. He did so through comparing one text with another, tracing the meaning of specific terms through Buddhist and Hindu texts, and relying on the archaeological and epigraphical scholarship of the day, including that of British scholars, such as James Prinsep (1799–1840), living in India, scholarship on what Burnouf refers to as the “monuments” of Indian Buddhism. Burnouf understood this to be a new approach to the study of Buddhism, and it was. He dedicated his translation of the *Lotus Sutra* to Brian Hodgson, calling him, *fondateur de la véritable étude du Bouddhisme par les textes et les monuments*, “founder of the true study of Buddhism through texts and monuments.” It has become clear over the subsequent decades that that appellation more accurately describes Burnouf himself.

Burnouf would provide the model for the study of Buddhism for the next century. This textualization of Buddhism, and especially of Indian Buddhism, was due in part to the absence of learned Buddhist monks in India at the time. It was also due to the fact that, under the influence of Burnouf, India, and especially “classical India,” would become the focus of the most influential European scholarship on Buddhism. Whether or not this represented “the true study of Buddhism” is a question worthy of consideration.

Humanization

One of the most important statements in Burnouf’s *Introduction* is found in a footnote about halfway through the volume, where we read, “The present volume is dedicated in its entirety to put in relief the purely human character of Buddhism.”⁷ As we survey the history of the European encounter with the Buddha, we see that during the first phase of that encounter, European travelers faced the problem of identifying the idols of Asia, idols known by

⁷ Burnouf 2009, p. 285, n. 90.

names like Xaca, Fo, and Sommonacodum, whom they described sometimes as gods, sometimes as demons, sometimes as humans. Regardless, the portrayal of the Buddha in European sources was generally quite negative. Among the dozens of examples that might be cited, we find this passage in *China Illustrata* by Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), regarded as one of the greatest scholars of his day:

So Xaca was born and he was the first who is said to have killed his mother. Then he pointed one hand toward heaven and the other down to the earth and said that except for him, there was none holy, not in heaven nor in earth. Then he betook himself to the mountain recesses and there he instituted this abominable idolatry with Satan's help. Afterwards he infected the whole Orient with his pestilent dogmas.⁸

By the eighteenth century, the Buddha was generally regarded as having been a man, but it was unclear where he had come from, although, as noted above, India was ultimately correctly identified; questions remained (indeed, as they do today) about the precise dates of his life and death. The first scholar to make a careful investigation of the dates of the Buddha using original sources was George Turnour, who translated large portions of the *Mahāvamsa*, the great chronicle of Sri Lanka. His interest in Buddhist texts, however, was largely for whatever historical information they might contain, seeking to determine the date of the Buddha's death in order to determine the dates of the various councils that followed in subsequent centuries. In fact, it appears that Turnour had little use for the Buddha himself. For Turnour, the Buddha is a “wonderful impostor,” Buddhists are credulous and superstitious. The Buddha's importance for Turnour is that he is a historical figure whose death can be dated, with a biography where historical fact can be distinguished from mythological fiction.⁹

The historicity of the Buddha was also crucial for Burnouf, who argues in the final chapter of the *Introduction* that it is with the teachings of the Buddha—the teachings of a man who did not claim to be a god, and, in Burnouf's opinion, who was not deified by his followers—that India emerged from the realm of myth and entered the realm of history. This was a powerful claim in the first half of the nineteenth century, where many argued that India had no history.

⁸ Kircher 1987, pp. 141–42.

⁹ Turnour 1838, pp. 991–92.

Burnouf's view of the Buddha would be influential in other ways as well. Unlike almost all the European writers who preceded him, Burnouf genuinely admired the Buddha: for preaching a simple system of ethics, freed from the trappings of mysticism and metaphysics; for making his teachings available to all who would hear them; for courageously challenging the corrupt institution of the Brahmins. Exactly how Burnouf came to see the Buddha in this way, and on the basis of what texts (for all he had was texts), is a fascinating question deserving of further study. However, we might note in brief that Burnouf, like all of us, was a product of his own times, growing up in a Paris where the Rights of Man were in the air, and in an intellectual lineage that was strongly anti-clerical. As he remarked to his student, Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), "I hate the Jesuits."

Conclusion

As we turn to the central question of this symposium, the question of modernity and Buddhism, and their history, I would like to suggest that the most important work of scholarship for that history is Burnouf's 1844 masterpiece. Although little mentioned and rarely read today, it had powerful effects. Through *Indianization*, it gave Buddhism a place of origin, and a single place of origin once and for all, a birthplace where, as in Greece and Italy, the classical civilization was dead, leaving only texts and monuments. Through *Sanskritization*, it gave Buddhism its own classical language, a dead language, and a language that was organically related to Greek and Latin, a language unlike Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Tibetan, the languages in which Buddhism had survived to the present day. Through *Textualization*, it gave Buddhism an ancient canon and made that canon the proper locus of research for understanding the origins of Buddhism. Through *Humanization*, it provided yet another link to ancient Greece and Rome, placing the Buddha not in a pantheon of idols or even gods, but in a pantheon of philosophers. Burnouf painted a portrait of the Buddha that would prove to be enormously influential, not only in Europe and America, but in Asia as well. Burnouf's portrait of the Buddha, a sympathetic portrait of a compassionate man who attained great wisdom through his own efforts and who challenged the corruption of the church, would prove to be powerful, eventually giving birth to what might be called "the scientific Buddha."¹⁰ These four things—Indianization, Sanskritization, Textualization, and Humanization—made Buddhism ancient; they also made it modern.

¹⁰ See Lopez 2012.

As we ponder the central question of this symposium, the question of modernity and Buddhism, we must acknowledge with the utmost respect the remarkable achievements of Eugène Burnouf. However, that feeling of respect carries with it a certain sense of disquiet, that something has gone wrong. If we must give a name to what went wrong, we would call it colonialism. We must recall that although Burnouf was not himself involved in the colonial project, he received his texts from Hodgson, an officer of the East India Company. As we continue in the seemingly endless task of measuring the effects of colonialism, we must acknowledge all of the knowledge that was created. In the process, however, the voice of authority about Buddhism, and in some senses the voice of the Buddha himself, came to speak in European tongues. We might then regard 1844 as the year when everything changed, dividing time, as the Christians do, into two periods, before and after a fateful year. In this case, the period after the epoch-making date is not simply a period of redemption. It is also a period of loss.

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