

Esoteric Buddhism

Fifth Edition, Annotated & Enlarged
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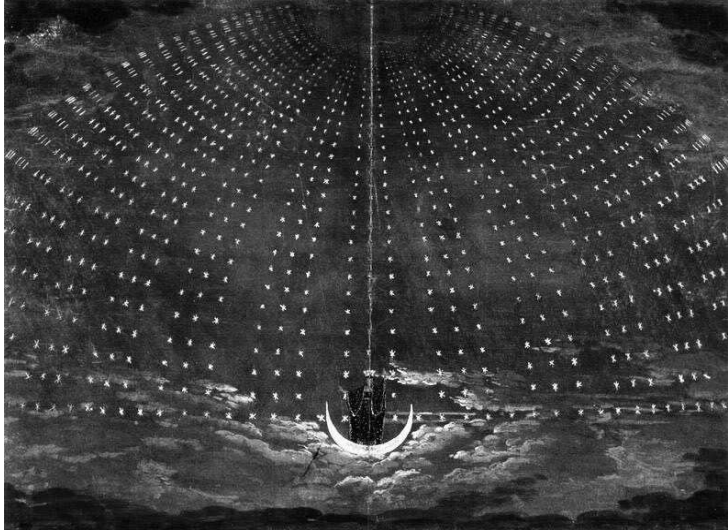
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Cover Image: *"Here she is! Watch out, or she might ask you to stab somebody! She's got a thing for stabbing!"* Karl Friedrich Schinkel, 1816

PREFACE
TO THE ANNOTATED EDITION.

SINCE this book was first published in the beginning of 1883, I have come into possession of much additional information bearing on many of the problems dealt with. But I am glad to say that such later teaching only reveals incompleteness in my original conception of the esoteric doctrine,—no material error so far. Indeed I have received from the great Adept himself, from whom I obtained my instruction in the first instance, the assurance that the book as it now stands is a sound and trustworthy statement of the scheme of Nature as understood by the initiates of occult science, which may have to be a good deal developed in the future, if the interest it excites is keen enough to constitute an efficient demand for further teaching of this kind on the part of the world at large, but will never have to be remodelled or apologized for. In view of this assurance it seems best that I should now put forward my later conclusions and additional information in the form of annotations on each branch of the subject, rather than infuse them into the original text, which, under the

circumstances, I am reluctant in any way to alter. I have therefore adopted that plan in the present edition.

As conveying an indirect acknowledgment of the general harmony to be traced between these teachings and the recognized philosophical tenets of certain other great schools of Indian thought, I may here refer to criticisms on this book, which were published in the Indian magazine the *Theosophist* in June, 1883, by "a Brahman Hindoo." The writer complains that in interpreting the esoteric doctrine, I have departed unnecessarily from accepted Sanscrit *nomenclature*; but his objection merely is that I have given unfamiliar names in some cases to ideas already embodied in Hindoo sacred writings, and that I have done too much honour to the religious system commonly known as Buddhism, by representing that as more closely allied with the esoteric doctrine than any other. "The popular wisdom of the majority of Hindoos to this day," says my Brahman critic, "is more or less tinged with the esoteric doctrine taught in Mr. Sinnett's book, misnamed 'Esoteric Buddhism,' while there is not a single village or hamlet in the whole of India in which people are not more or less acquainted with the sublime tenets of the Vedanta philosophy. . . . The effects of Kauma in the next birth, the enjoyment of its fruits, good or evil, in a subjective or spiritual state of existence prior to the

re-incarnation of the spiritual monad in this or any other world, the loitering of the unsatisfied souls or human shells in the earth (Kama loca), the pralyic and manvantaric periods . . . are not only intelligible, but are even familiar to a great many Hindoos, under names different from those made use of by the author of 'Esoteric Buddhism.'" So much the better,—I take leave to rejoin,—from the point of view of Western readers, to whom it must be a matter of indifference whether the esoteric Hindoo or Bhuddhist religion is nearest to absolutely true spiritual science, which should certainly bear no name that appears to wed it to any one faith in the external world more than to another. All that we in Europe can be anxious for, is to arrive at a clear understanding as to the essential principles of that science, and if we find the principles defined in this book claimed by the cultured representatives of more than one great Oriental creed as equally the underlying truths of their different systems, we shall be all the better inclined to believe the present exposition of doctrine worth our attention.

In regard to the complaint itself, that the teachings here reduced to an intelligible shape are incorrectly described by the name this book bears, I cannot do better than quote the note by which the editor of the *Theosophist* replies to his Brahman contributor. This note says :—"We print the above letter as it expresses

in courteous language, and in an able manner, the views of a large number of our Hindoo brothers: At the same time it must be stated that the name of 'Esoteric Buddhism' was given to Mr. Sinnett's latest publication, not because the doctrine propounded therein is meant to be specially identified with any particular form of faith, but because *Buddhism* means the doctrine of the *Buddhas*, the Wise i.e. the Wisdom Religion." For my own part I need only add that I fully accept and adopt that explanation of the matter. It would indeed be a misconception of the design which this book is intended to subserve, to suppose it concerned with the recommendation, to a *dilettante* modern taste, of Old World fashions in religious thought. The external forms and fancies of religion in one age may be a little purer, in another a little more corrupt, but they inevitably adapt themselves to their period, and it would be extravagant to imagine them interchangeable. The present statement is not put forward in the hope of making Buddhists from among the adherents of any other system, but with the view of conveying to thoughtful readers, as well in the East as in the West, a series of leading ideas relating to the actual verities of Nature, and the real facts of man's progress through evolution, which have been communicated to the present writer by Eastern philosophers, and thus fall most readily into an

Oriental mould. For the value of these teachings will perhaps be most fully realized when we clearly perceive that they are scientific in their character rather than controversial. Spiritual truths, if they are truths, may evidently be dealt with in a no less scientific spirit than chemical reactions. And no religious feeling, of whatever colour it may be, need be disturbed by the importation into the general stock of knowledge of new discoveries about the constitution and nature of man on the plane of his higher activities. True religion will eventually find a way to assimilate much fresh knowledge, in the same way that it always finally acquiesces in a general enlargement of Knowledge on the physical plane. This, in the first instance, may sometimes disconcert notions associated with religious belief,—as geological science at first embarrassed biblical chronology. But in time men came to see that the essence of the biblical statement does not reside in the literal sense of the cosmological passages in the Old Testament, and religious conceptions grew all the purer for the relief thus afforded. In just the same way when positive scientific knowledge begins to embrace a comprehension of the laws relating to the spiritual development of man,—some misconceptions of Nature, long blended with religion, may have to give way, but still it will be found that the central ideas of true religion have been cleared up and strengthened all the better for the process.

Especially as such processes continue, will the internal dissensions of the religious world be inevitably subdued. The warfare of sects can only be due to a failure on the part of rival sectarians to grasp fundamental facts. Could a time come when the basic ideas on which religion rests, should be comprehended with the same certainty with which we comprehend some primary physical laws, and disagreement about them be recognized by all educated people as ridiculous, then there would not be room for very acrimonious divergences of religious sentiment. Externals of religious thought would still differ in different climates and among different races,—as dress and dietaries differ,—but such differences would not give rise to intellectual antagonism.

Basic facts of the nature indicated are developed, it appears to me, in the exposition of spiritual science we have now obtained from our Eastern friends. It is quite unnecessary for religious thinkers to turn aside from them under the impression that they are arguments in favour of some Eastern, in preference to the more general Western creed. If medical science were to discover a new fact about man's body, were to unveil some hitherto concealed principle on which the growth of skin and flesh and bone is carried on, that discovery would not be regarded as trenching at all on the domain of religion. Would the domain of religion be invaded, for example, by a discovery that

should go one step behind the action of the nerves, and disclose a finer set of activities manipulating these as they manipulate the muscles? At all events, even if such a discovery might begin to reconcile science and religion, no man who allows any of his higher faculties to enter into his religious thinking would put aside a positive fact of Nature, plainly shown to be such, as hostile to religion. Being a fact it would inevitably fit in with all other facts, and with religious truth among the number. So with the great mass of information in reference to the spiritual evolution of man embodied in the present statement. Our best plan evidently is to ask, before we look into the report I bring forward, not whether it will square in all respects with preconceived views, but whether it really does introduce us to a series of natural facts connected with the growth and development of man's higher faculties. If it does this we may wisely examine the facts first in the scientific spirit, and leave them to exercise whatever effect on collateral belief may be reasonable and legitimate later on.

Ramifying, as the explanation proceeds, into a great many side paths, it will be seen that the central statement now put forward constitutes a theory of anthropology which completes and spiritualizes the ordinary notions of physical evolution. The theory which traces man's development by successive and

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very gradual improvements of animal *forms* from generation to generation, is a very barren and miserable theory regarded as an all-embracing account of creation ; but properly understood it paves the way for a comprehension of the higher concurrent process which is all the while evolving the soul of man in the spiritual realm of existence. The present view of the matter reconciles the evolutionary method with the deeply seated craving of every self-conscious entity for perpetuity of individual life. The disjointed series of improving *forms* on this earth have no individuality, and the life of each in turn is a separate transaction which finds in the next similar transaction, no compensation for suffering involved, no justice, no fruit of its efforts. It is just possible to argue on the assumption of a new independent creation of a human soul every time a new human form is produced by physiological growth, that in the after spiritual states of such soul, justice may be awarded ; but then this conception is itself at variance with the fundamental idea of evolution, which traces, or believes that it traces the origin of each soul to the workings of highly developed matter in each case. Nor is it less at variance with the analogies of Nature ; but without going into that, it is enough for the moment to perceive that the theory of spiritual evolution, as set forth in the teaching of esoteric science, is at any rate in harmony with these

analogies, while at the same time it satisfactorily meets the requirements of justice, and of the instinctive demand for continuity of individual life.

This theory recognizes the evolution of the soul as a process that is quite continuous in itself, though carried out partly through the instrumentality of a great series of dissociated forms. Putting aside for the moment the profound metaphysics of the theory which trace the principle of life from the original first cause of the cosmos, we find the soul as an entity emerging from the animal kingdom, and passing into the earliest human forms, without being at that time ripe for the higher intellectual life with which the present state of humanity renders us familiar. But through successive incarnations in forms whose physical improvement, under the Darwinian law, is constantly fitting them to be its habitation at each return to objective life, it gradually gathers that enormous range of experience which is summed up in its higher development. In the intervals between its physical incarnation, it prolongs and works out, and finally exhausts or transmutes into so much abstract development, the personal experiences of each life. This is the clue to the true explanation of that apparent difficulty which besets the cruder form of the theory of re-incarnation which independent speculation has sometimes thrown out. Each man is unconscious of having led previous lives, therefore

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he contends that subsequent lives can afford him no compensation for this one. He overlooks the enormous importance of the intervening spiritual condition, in which he by no means forgets the personal adventures and emotions he has just passed through, and in the course of which he distills these into so much cosmic progress. In the following pages the elucidation of this profoundly interesting mystery is attempted, and it will be seen that the view of events now afforded us in not only a solution of the problems of life and death, but of many very perplexing experiences on the border-land between those conditions—or rather between physical and spiritual life—which have engaged attention and speculation so widely of recent years in most civilized countries.

PREFACE TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION.

THE teachings embodied in the present volume let in a flood of light on questions connected with Buddhist doctrine which have deeply perplexed previous writers on that religion, and offer the world for the first time a practical clue to the meaning of almost all ancient religious symbolism. More than this, the esoteric doctrine, when properly understood, will be found to advance an overpowering claim on the attention of earnest thinkers. Its tenets are not presented to us as the invention of any founder or prophet. Its testimony is based on no written scriptures. Its views of Nature have been evolved by the researches of an immense succession of investigators, qualified for their task by the possession of spiritual faculties and perceptions of a higher order than those belonging to ordinary humanity. In the course of ages the block of knowledge thus accumulated, concerning the origin of the world and of man and the ultimate destinies of our race—concerning also the nature of other worlds and

states of existence differing from those of our present life—checked and examined at every point, verified in all directions, and constantly under examination throughout, has come to be looked on by its custodians as constituting the absolute truth concerning spiritual things, the actual state of the facts regarding vast regions of vital activity lying beyond this earthly existence.

European philosophy, whether concerned with religion or pure metaphysics, has so long been used to a sense of insecurity in speculations outrunning the limits of physical experiment, that absolute truth about spiritual things is hardly recognized any longer by prudent thinkers as a reasonable object of pursuit ; but different habits of thought have been acquired in Asia. The secret doctrine which, to a considerable extent, I am now enabled to expound, is regarded not only by all its adherents, but by vast numbers who have never expected to know more of it than that such a doctrine exists, as a mine of entirely trustworthy knowledge from which all religions and philosophies have derived whatever they possess of truth, and with which every religion must coincide if it claims to be a mode of expression for truth.

This is a bold claim indeed, but I venture to announce the following exposition as one of immense importance to the world, because I believe that claim can be substantiated.

I do not say that within the compass of this volume the authenticity of the esoteric doctrine can be proved. Such proof cannot be given by any process of argument; only through the development in each inquirer for himself of the faculties required for the direct observation of Nature along the lines indicated. But his *primâ facie* conclusion may be determined by the extent to which the views of Nature about to be unfolded, may recommend themselves to his mind, and by the reasons which exist for trusting the powers of observation of those by whom they are communicated.

Will it be supposed that the very magnitude of the claim now made on behalf of the esoteric doctrine, lifts the present statement out of the region of inquiry to which its title refers—inquiry as to the real inner meaning of the definite and specific religion called Buddhism? The fact is, however, that esoteric Buddhism, though by no means divorced from the associations of exoteric Buddhism, must not be conceived to constitute a mere *imperium in imperio*—a central school of culture in the vortex of the Buddhist world. In proportion as Buddhism retreats into the inner penetralia of its faith, these are found to merge into the inner penetralia of other faiths. The cosmic conceptions, and the knowledge of Nature on which Buddhism not merely rests, but which constitute esoteric Buddhism, equally constitute esoteric Brah-

minism. And the esoteric doctrine is thus regarded by those of all creeds who are "enlightened" (in the Buddhist sense) as the absolute truth concerning Nature, Man, the origin of the Universe, and the destinies toward which its inhabitants are tending. At the same time, exoteric Buddhism has remained in closer union with the esoteric doctrine than any other popular religion. An exposition of the inner knowledge, addressed to English readers in the present day, will thus associate itself irresistibly with familiar outlines of Buddhist teaching. It will certainly impart to these a living meaning they generally seem to be without, but all the more on this account may the esoteric doctrine be most conveniently studied in its Buddhist aspect: one, moreover, which has been so strongly impressed upon it since the time of Gautama Buddha that though the essence of the doctrine dates back to a far more remote antiquity, the Buddhist colouring has now permeated its whole substance. That which I am about to put before the reader *is* esoteric Buddhism, and for European students approaching it for the first time, any other designation would be a misnomer.

The statement I have to make must be considered in its entirety before the reader will be able to comprehend why initiates in the esoteric doctrine regard the concession involved in the present disclosures of the general outlines of this doctrine as

one of startling magnitude. One explanation of this feeling, however, may be readily seen to spring from the extreme sacredness that has always been attached by their ancient guardians to the inner vital truths of Nature. Hitherto this sacredness has always prescribed their absolute concealment from the profane herd. And so far as that policy of concealment,—the tradition of countless ages,—is now being given up, the new departure which the appearance of this volume signalizes will be contemplated with surprise and regret by a great many initiated disciples. The surrender to criticism which may sometimes perhaps be clumsy and irreverent, of doctrines which have hitherto been regarded by such persons as too majestic in their import to be talked of at all except under circumstances of befitting solemnity, will seem to them a terrible profanation of the great mysteries. From the European point of view it would be unreasonable to expect that such a book as this can be exempt from the usual rough-and-tumble treatment of new ideas. And special convictions or common-place bigotry may sometimes render such treatment in the present case peculiarly inimical. But all that, though a matter of course to European exponents of the doctrine like myself, will seem very grievous and disgusting to its earlier and more regular representatives. They will appeal sadly to the wisdom of the time-honoured rule which, in the

old symbolical way, forbade the initiates from casting pearls before swine.

Happily, as I think, the rule has not been allowed to operate any longer to the prejudice of those who, while still far from being initiated, in the occult sense of the term, will probably have become, by sheer force of modern culture, qualified to appreciate the concession.

Part of the information contained in the following pages was first thrown out in a fragmentary form in the *Theosophist*, a monthly magazine, published at Madras, by the leaders of the Theosophical Society. As almost all the articles referred to have been my own writing, I have not hesitated to weld parts of them, when this course has been convenient, into the present volume. A certain advantage is gained by thus showing how the separate pieces of the mosaic as first presented to public notice, drop naturally into their places in the (comparatively) finished pavement.

The doctrine or system now disclosed in its broad outlines has been so jealously guarded hitherto, that no mere literary researches, though they might have curry-combed all India, could have brought to light any morsel of the information thus revealed. It is given out to the world at last by the free grace of those in whose keeping it has hitherto lain. Nothing could ever have extorted from them its very first

letter. It is only after a perusal of the present explanations that their position generally, as regards their present disclosures or their previous reticence can be criticized or even comprehended. The views of Nature now put forward are altogether unfamiliar to European thinkers ; the policy of the graduates in esoteric knowledge, which has grown out of their long intimacy with these views must be considered in connection with the peculiar bearings of the doctrine itself.

As for the circumstances under which these revelations were first foreshadowed in the *Theosophist*, and are now rounded off and expanded as my readers will perceive, it is enough for the moment to say, that the Theosophical Society, through my connection with which the materials dealt with in this volume have come into my hands, owes its establishment to certain persons who are among the custodians of esoteric science. The information poured out at last for the benefit of all who are ripe to receive it, has been destined for communication to the world through the Theosophical Society since the foundation of that body, and later circumstances only have indicated myself as the agent through whom the communication could be conveniently made.

Let me add, that I do not regard myself as the sole exponent for the outer world, at this crisis, of esoteric truth. These teachings are the outcome, as regards

philosophical knowledge, of the relations with the outer world which have been established by the custodians of esoteric truth *through me*. And it is only regarding the acts and intentions of those esoteric teachers who have chosen to work through me, that I can have any certain knowledge. But, in different ways, some other writers seem to be engaged in expounding for the benefit of the world—and, as I believe, in accordance with a great plan, of which this volume is a part—the same truths, in different aspects, that I am commissioned to unfold. Probably the great activity at present of literary speculation dealing with problems that overstep the range of physical knowledge, may also be in some way provoked by that policy, on the part of the great custodians of esoteric truth, of which my own book is certainly one manifestation. Again, the ardour now shown in “Psychical Research,” by the very distinguished, highly gifted, and cultivated men, who lead the society in London devoted to that object, is, to my inner convictions—knowing as I do something of the way the spiritual aspirations of the world are silently influenced by those whose work lies in that department of Nature—the obvious fruit of efforts, parallel to those with which I am more immediately concerned.

It only remains for me to disclaim, on behalf of the treatise which ensues, any pretension to high finish as regards the language in which it is cast. Longer

familiarity with the vast and complicated scheme of cosmogony disclosed, will no doubt suggest improvements in the phraseology employed to expound it. Two years ago, neither I, nor any other European living, knew the alphabet of the science here for the first time put into a scientific shape—or subject at all events to an attempt in that direction—the science of Spiritual Causes and their Effects, of Super-physical Consciousness, of Cosmical Evolution. Though ideas had begun to offer themselves to the world in more or less embarrassing disguise of mystic symbology, no attempt had ever been made by any esoteric teacher, two years back, to put the doctrine forward in its plain abstract purity. As my own instruction progressed on those lines, I have had to coin phrases and suggest English words as equivalents for the ideas which were presented to my mind. I am by no means convinced that in all cases I have coined the best possible phrases and hit on the most neatly expressive words. For example, at the threshold of the subject we come upon the necessity of giving some name to the various elements or attributes of which the complete human creature is made up. “Element” would be an impossible word to use, on account of the confusion that would arise from its use in other significations; and the least objectionable on the whole seemed to me “principle,” though to an ear trained in the niceties of metaphysical expression this word

will have a very unsatisfactory sound in some of its present applications. Quite possibly, therefore, in process of time the Western nomenclature of the esoteric doctrine may be greatly developed in advance of that I have provisionally constructed. The Oriental nomenclature is far more elaborate, but metaphysical Sanscrit seems to be painfully embarrassing to a translator—the fault, my Indian friends assure me, not of Sanscrit, but of the language in which they are now required to express the Sanscrit idea. Eventually we may find that, with the help of a little borrowing from familiar Greek quarries, English may prove more receptive of the new doctrine—or rather, of the primeval doctrine as newly disclosed—than has been supposed possible in the East.

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