

Book Review: *Esoteric Buddhism*

Esoteric Buddhism was originally published in 1883 by Alfred Percey Sinnett, the editor of *The Pioneer*, which was the leading English-speaking newspaper in India. A.P. Sinnett and his wife also received many of the so-called Mahatma Letters. According to Sinnett, “no attempt had ever been made by any esoteric teacher, two years back, to put the doctrine forward in its plain abstract purity.” This reminds the student that Sinnett, Blavatsky, Olcott, Leadbetter and others were important pioneers who helped bring the wisdom traditions of the East to the West. Sinnett states clearly in the first chapter, “I am bringing to my readers knowledge which I have obtained by favour rather than by effort,” and he therefore does not treat the subject as an initiated “knower” but as a scribe who attempts to convey what was imparted by the “Tibetan Brotherhood.” This term refers to the arhats, adepts, and masters of the wisdom who, according to Sinnett, remain cloistered in a hidden region in Tibet.

Sinnett begins by contrasting Theosophy with Buddhism, asserting that they are related but distinct philosophies. Sinnett devotes a chapter to Buddha wherein he attempts to explain Buddha’s esoteric teaching as well as his later incarnations as Sankaracharya and Tsong-ka-pa. Sinnett’s metaphysical views revolve around mankind’s seven principles, which are enumerated in his work beginning with the Body as the lowest: 1. Body/rupa, 2. Vitality/prana, 3. Astral body/linga sharira, 4. Animal soul/kama rupa, 5. Human soul/manas, 6. Spiritual soul/buddhi, 7. Spirit/atma.

Sinnett introduces the reader to the Planetary Chain, of which the “Darwinian theory of evolution is simply...a portion...of the vast natural truth.” As he begins to describe the chains, globes, and rounds, he describes a spiral-cyclic system of worlds as the “circuit round which all

individual spiritual entities...pass; and that passage constitutes the Evolution of Man.” Through this analogy, Sinnett presents a vast cosmic model that progressively develops the “One Life” through seven kingdoms of nature. He presents the system of septenary Earth rounds as a V, beginning at the top-left with spiritualized mankind beginning the descent from “spiritual intelligence” toward the inverted apex of “material intelligence” in the middle fourth round. It may provide small relief for students to learn that mankind currently finds itself midway through this lowest mid-point. From this cyclical low point mankind will begin the ascent toward the top-right of the V, which will extend higher than the earlier point due to a centrifugal spiralling, not merely circular, movement.

Linked with the globes and rounds are the World Periods, whereby the “development of humanity on each world is worked out by a series of races developed within the limits of each world in turn.” These races are seven, and an equal number of sub-races can be identified within them, and we are said to be in the fifth root race at this time, the Aryan. Sinnett also states that these root races are “divided from each other by great convulsions of Nature, and by great geological changes.” This leads into a short discussion of the third (Lemurian) and fourth (Atlantian) root races which long antedate our present age.

Sinnett devotes a chapter to the after-death state known as Devachan. At the time of death, he states that the three lower principles are abandoned and the four higher principles escape into the next higher plane as a “trial of the extent to which the fifth principle has been developed.” Sinnett asserts that the self-conscious personality survives in Devachan, and it is in this state that they experience the beneficent spiritual effects of the physical causes they engendered while on earth, with the important distinction that the negative effects of their karma are only visited upon

the person during physical life, and therefore must await the next incarnation. There is also no method of alleviating karma while in Devachan, it is considered to be strictly a reward for those higher principles in man. Sinnett explains the long life-cycle in Devachan, with “death” there resulting in the birth of a new human incarnation on Earth.

Contrasting with Devachan is Kama loca, the region of desire. This is the place for the working out of the many transient desires acquired through physical life, which must be accomplished before the soul enters Devachan. These two states represent the choice between materiality and spirit, and mark the individual’s specific point of polarization on that spectrum. Nirvana is defined as “a sublime state of conscious rest in omniscience,” while the even higher state of parabrahm is only hinted at. Summarizing the One Work, Sinnett states that “the only thing of importance at present is to cultivate those tendencies in mankind which may launch as many Egos as possible upon such a Karmic path that the growth of their spirituality in future births will be promoted.”

1. Sinnett, A. P. *Esoteric Buddhism*. London: Trübner & Co., 1883.
<https://www.amazon.com/Esoteric-Buddhism-Alfred-Percy-Sinnett/dp/1791374662>.
2. Blavatsky, H. P. *The Key to Theosophy: Being a Clear Exposition, in the Form of Question and Answer, of the Ethics, Science, and Philosophy for the Study of Which the Theosophical Society Has Been Founded*. London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1889.
<https://www.amazon.com/Key-Theosophy-Helena-P-Blavatsky/dp/1987718194>.