

Eugène Burnouf, Father of Buddhist Studies

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EUGÈNE Burnouf only published two books devoted to Buddhism and its *sūtras*, but these two works are so remarkable because they not only mark the starting point of Buddhist studies in the West, but also two hundred years later, they remain relevant today. This despite the fact that both books were partly unfinished, one being published posthumously and the other just the first volume of a trilogy. To call their author a brilliant man would be an understatement.

Born in Paris on 8 April, 1801, Burnouf certainly made the most of his classical education from his teachers at Louis-le-Grand high school, from the École des Chartes (Historical Sciences University), but also from Antoine Léonard de Chézy, the first holder of the Sanskrit Chair at the Collège de France, and from his own father, Jean-Louis Burnouf, also a Sanskrit specialist.

He devoted his thirty-year career to the study of Indo-Iranian languages and literature; he was the first, in collaboration with the German-Norwegian scholar Christian Lassen, to put forward an *Essai sur le pâli, ou langue sacrée de la presqu'île au-delà du Gange* (Essay on Pāli, or the Sacred Language of the Peninsula beyond the Ganges), published in 1826; the first again, from 1829 onwards, to study and decipher Zend, the sacred language of Zoroastrianism and to publish several crucial works, studies and translations on the subject. Above all, he was the first in Europe to read and study the collection of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts received in 1837 by the Société Asiatique (Asiatic Society) in Paris, from Brian Houghton Hodgson, a British resident at the Nepalese court.

First Translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* into European Language

The first twenty-four of these manuscripts arrived in France on or around 20 April, 1837; another sixty-four on 14 July, and fifty-nine more were sent directly to Eugène Burnouf. In total, over one hundred and fifty manuscripts, including some of the most important works of



Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi, translated by Burnouf, Paris, 1852: the first complete version of the *Lotus Sūtra* in a European language

complete work, with nearly three hundred pages plus one hundred and fifty pages of notes. But Burnouf did not publish it: in a letter to Hodgson in 1841, he states that he first wants to write an Introduction to a book that he deems ‘bizarre’ ... This was to become *Introduction à l’histoire du bouddhisme indien* (The Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism), published in 1844: more than six hundred and forty pages, which, however, only represented the first part of the work he had envisaged!

Burnouf, who essentially gives an analysis of Buddhism from the Sanskrit manuscripts provided by Hodgson, wanted to complete a counterpart based on Pāli texts—to be followed by a comparative study of these two documents and a ‘historical sketch’ on the spread of Buddhism within and beyond India! Unfortunately, he ran out of time to finish it before his death, although his archives contain several hundred pages of the translations he had already completed.

In barely fifteen years, Burnouf had read, assimilated, understood and translated an impressive collection of Sanskrit and Pāli texts. But, apart from numerous and lengthy excerpts in his Introduction, only the full translation of *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi* (The Lotus of the Good Law) would be published in 1852, the year of his death: a posthumous and unfinished work because Burnouf had wanted to add twenty appendices

Mahāyāna literature: the eight thousand stanza *Prajñāpāramitā*, the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, the *Sukhāvātīvyūha*, the *Laṅkāvatāra*, the *Lalitavistara*, Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*, Shantideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and of course, the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*), which he decided to work on exclusively from 25 April, 1837.

On 5 June, in a letter to Hodgson, he says he had already read and translated a large part of two chapters. He admits to not understanding everything [...] but has already had the idea to publish, as soon as possible, an “analysis” or *Observations on the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*. Two years later, he completes the full translation of the ‘*Lotus*’: the complete

that would account for more than half of the nine-hundred page tome!

Burnouf's Remarkable Legacy

Burnouf's legacy is as remarkable as his own powers of innovation. He was the first to bring the study of Buddhism into the field of Sanskrit Studies and to ask that it be studied in its native language. He wanted the Buddha's teaching to be returned to its historical, geographical and cultural birthplace: India BCE (Before Common Era). Because for him, Buddhism was a "completely Indian phenomenon." He thus asserts his conviction that Buddhism should be studied not as a mythical religion, but as a historical event, and he never ceases, through his study of the literature, to establish as accurate a timeline as possible.

Thanks to Burnouf, Buddhism was the first religion, after Christianity, to be recognised in the study of the History of Religions—as is made clear in the full title of his *Introduction* and of his inaugural address at the Collège de France: "There is no real philology without philosophy and history."

But this historical focus on the Buddha was to have some less positive consequences: Burnouf was the first to have regarded the Buddha as a moralist and his teaching as a philosophical system. Read by scholars from Europe and America, but also by many artists and philosophers—Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as well as Wagner—it therefore offered the intellectuals of his time a subject of heated discussions, whose reverberations—not always positive—are still being felt today.

This heir of the Age of Enlightenment drew a qualitative distinction between the 'simple' and 'developed' *sūtras*. The first, which he considered to be the oldest, depict the Buddha as a teacher of morality addressing everyone in simple and accessible language. By contrast the 'developed' *sūtras* are deemed to be less old, more mythological and more metaphysical, in a word: more religious. His concern for chronology does not go so far as to give priority to 'original Buddhism', but it did open the way for those who would promote it and saw the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna teachings become considered as deformations or even as a degeneration of the original message.

On the other hand, this studious workaholic never ceased to stay abreast of his contemporaries' research, sharing discoveries and analyses with them through sustained correspondence and even a few trips to England and Germany. If he is now rightly regarded as the 'founding father' of Buddhist Studies, it is because of this constant desire to compare original sources to understand his subject to the best of his ability.

And also because he never wanted to “lose sight of the precious comparison of texts with historical and archaeological data, in short he used all available external sources of information.”¹

While primarily philological, it was his multidisciplinary method that Burnouf presented in these two books. At the risk of boring the reader, he does not so much seek to provide answers to questions as to bring the reader with him in a pattern of ‘work in progress’ thinking that Théodore Pavie called “written lessons” adding: “He invariably stopped where certainty ended; but he did not discourage the reader from drawing conclusions from the study of his work.”²

Also, even though some of his biases seem antiquated today, his tireless rigour and the consistent prudence of his analysis—including on such sensitive topics as the definition of *nirvāṇa* or analysis of the *pratīyasamutpāda*—are admirable, and remain catalysts for contemporary research today.

Although his work is often forgotten and, above all, rarely read—the first English translation of his *Introduction* only appeared in 2010...—his ideas and his method have become so “fundamental” that they still represent the unquestioned foundation of any scientific research on Buddha and Buddhism.

Notes

¹ Jean Filliozat, « Les étapes des études bouddhiques », in *Présence du Bouddhisme*, Saïgon, 1959.

² Théodore Pavie, *Notice sur les travaux de M. Eugène Burnouf*, 1853.

Author Biography

Dominique Trotignon is a Director and Teacher at the Institut d'Études Bouddhiques (Institute of Buddhist Studies), Honorary President of the ‘Vivekārāma’ Buddhist Theravāda Association and conducts works of synthesis and reflection on the ancient Buddhism of India and the Theravāda of South East Asia, as well as on the establishment of Buddhism in France. He is the co-author of *La mort est-elle une fin?* (Is death an end?) (Salvator, 2009) and has also contributed to the writing of several anthologies, including those of the collection *Ce qu'en disent les religions* (What religions say) on the theme of *Les femmes et les religions* (Women and Religions) and *La Création du Monde* (The Creation of the World) (Atelier, 2002 and 2004).