Henry Steel Olcott: The Buddhist Catechism
(India, 1881/1908)

Introduction

In December 1878, the theosophist Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) took a ship from New York to Bombay. For the rest of his life, he would mainly live in India, because he was, or became, convinced that the solution to his spiritual questions lay in Asia. Finally, he settled in Adyar, today a borough of Madras (Chennai), where the Theosophical Society had its headquarters. In India, he began to conceive a worldview in which he combined Western and Indian traditions in the frame of his theosophical positions. His perhaps most successful publication was his *Buddhist Catechism* of 1881—a publication which implied that Olcott, an American protestant with only superficial knowledge of Buddhism, became the voice of Buddhism, at least in his own perspective.

The Author and His Context

Olcott was born as a son of a Presbyterian businessman, Henry Wyckoff Olcott, and Emily Steel Olcott, and brought up in New Jersey. After having quit university and after an engagement as a journalist he joined the Union in the American Civil War. Since 1868 he worked as a lawyer. He became a freemason probably around this time. In 1874 he visited spiritualist séances of the Eddy family in Vermont, where communications with spirits were claimed to take place; Mary Baker Eddy later became the founder of Christian Science. In these circles he met Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who with her *Secret Doctrine* became a key figure of nineteenth-century occultism.1 Together with Blavatsky he founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. This society may well be understood as a backlash against spiritualist practices. Instead of assuming that a medium proved the existence of spirits and of an afterworld, theosophists presented additional perspectives: They searched for personal experience (in later years by meditation) and they claimed to explore the hidden forces in nature. With regard to the *Buddhist Catechism*, a third field was highly important. Theosophists began to collect and study religious texts from non-Western cultures, in order to find a secret religion in or above the known religions

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1 See chapter 1.12 in this volume.
and thus gain access to a spiritual and hidden knowledge. The Theosophical Society, as an elitist ‘brotherhood,’ was then to transfer this knowledge under the guidance of secret ‘Masters,’ the ‘Mahatmas.’ In short: Theosophists amplified the empirical tenets of spiritualism by adding on personal experience and a hermeneutical construction of knowledge, thus being part of the historicist reinterpretation of Western culture in the late nineteenth century.

In 1878, Blavatsky and Olcott moved to India. They became convinced that Buddhism provided the oldest scriptures and the deepest thoughts of mankind and guaranteed ‘higher knowledge.’ They started an intensive search for masters of meditation—without success.\(^2\) In 1880, the two ‘theosophical twins,’ Blavatsky and Olcott, took the *pansil*, the Five Precepts of a Buddhist lay-person (Pali: *pancasila*) and regarded themselves as Buddhists. Olcott (as well as Blavatsky) became a strong critic of Christianity and tried to support the Buddhists in Sri Lanka, e.g. by building up a school-system as an alternative to the Christian missionary colleges. Olcott, remaining president of the Theosophical Society until his death in 1907, maintained his engagement for Buddhist education in Ceylon and for the unification of the different Buddhist schools and traditions throughout his life. His *Buddhist Catechism* played a key role in these efforts.

*The Buddhist Catechism*

*The Buddhist Catechism* first appeared in English and Sinhalese in Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), on 24 July 1881.\(^3\) At that time, Sri Lanka, which had been occupied by the British in 1815, was a part of the Empire and dominated by the Europeans in terms of economy, power and culture. Especially the educational system was strongly influenced by the Britons. Since getting one of the well-paid jobs in the colonial administration was bound to an English education, most Ceylonese families tried to send their children to one of the many Christian missionary schools. Traditional forms of learning were gradually displaced by modern English education, which included Christian religious instruction in its curriculum. By the mid-nineteenth century, a major part of the coastal middle class paid at least lip-service to Christianity. In this context, Olcott pursued a threefold purpose with his *Catechism*: to serve as a basis for the instruction of Buddhist pupils in the Theosophist-founded schools; to provide a ground


\(^3\) Howard Murphet, *Yankee Beacon of Buddhist Light: Life of Col. Henry S. Olcott* (Wheaton/Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1988 (1972)).