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## Étienne Lamotte (1903–1983)

In May of 1983 Monseigneur Étienne Lamotte passed away. Professor Lamotte was acknowledged to be the greatest living authority on Buddhism in the Western world. With his death, we have lost one of the greatest scholars of our time, and those who had the privilege to know him personally, have lost a most amiable friend and colleague.

Étienne Lamotte was born in Dinant, Belgium, on November 21, 1903, where his father, Georges Lamotte, had been appointed president of the court. At the same time, Georges Lamotte was a distinguished scholar in the field of History. In 1915-1920, Étienne studied at the Collège Notre-Dame de Belle-Vue à Dinant, and, later on, evidently under the influence of his family, he decided to join the roman-catholic clergy. He continued his education in philosophy, theology, and classical philology at the Université Catholique in Louvain (Leuven) and at the Theological Seminary in Mechelen. From the university he obtained the degree of *Candidat en Philosophie de S. Thomas* in 1923. Later on, he extended the scope of his interest to the field of Oriental Studies, and particularly Indian Studies. In 1925, Étienne Lamotte was awarded the degree of *Licencié in Oriental Languages*. Thereafter he spent the year of 1927 for studies at the *Università della Sapienza* in Rome. In 1928-1930, Étienne Lamotte worked as a teacher at the Collège Saint-Pierre in Louvain, but, at the same time, he continued his studies in the field of Indology and Buddhology at the University of Louvain. In 1929, Lamotte obtained the degree of *Doctor Linguarum Orientalium*, and subsequently, in 1930 after submitting his doctoral thesis “*Notes sur la Bhagavad-gītā*,” he was promoted *Docteur en Philosophie et Lettres*. He was also awarded the first *Laureat des Concours Universitaires 1928-30* in the field of Oriental languages together with a travel grant for higher education in Paris which happened to be the most important center of Western Buddhology at that time. Here, he pursued studies with the most famous Buddhologists of this period, Paul Demiéville, Alfred Foucher, Marcelle Lalour, Sylvain Lévi and Jean Przyluski.

Returning to Belgium in 1930, Étienne Lamotte became the foremost disciple of Louis de La Vallée Poussin (1869-1938). Louis de La Vallée Poussin had been appointed professor at the University of Gent in 1894, but, on

account of the language controversy in Belgium, he was forced to cease teaching in 1929. Consequently he had the opportunity to fully concentrate on his research. He accepted Lamotte as his personal disciple, and both regularly worked together during the following years.

In 1932, Étienne Lamotte was appointed reader and in 1937 Professor Ordinarius at the University of Louvain. For some years, he was obliged to teach Greek literature in addition to his Indological and Buddhological lectures, and he was elected for several offices at the university, most notably as the President of the Oriental Institute in 1950-1952 and as the Dean of the *Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres* in 1952.

The *Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* elected Étienne Lamotte Corresponding Member in 1951 and Ordinary Member in 1959. At the Royal Academy he continued the tradition of Buddhist Studies which had been initiated by Louis de La Vallée Poussin many years ago. In recognition of his extraordinary achievements as a scholar, Étienne Lamotte has been awarded many honors, and some of them may be mentioned here: 1952 Honorary Member of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* (Paris), 1960 Honorary Member of the *Société Asiatique* (Paris), 1967 Honorary Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain (London), 1976 Honorary Fellow of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. He was elected Member of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* in Paris in 1959, Academician of the China Academy (Taipei) in 1968, Fellow of the British Academy in 1970, and Member of the *Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* in 1972. Étienne Lamotte was also awarded honorary doctorates in Gent (Belgium), in Rome and in Kelaniya (Sri Lanka).

Lamotte's importance as a scholar in general and his contribution for the improvement of the mutual understanding between Buddhists and Christians has also been acknowledged by the ecclesiastic authorities of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1941 he was awarded the dignity of *Canonicus Honoris Causae* of the Metropolitan Church in Mechelen. In 1954 Pope Paul VI made him Correspondent of the Papal Secretariate for the Non-Christians, and in 1964 the dignity of *Praelatus Domesticus* of H.H. the Pope was conferred on him.

Étienne Lamotte drew his information on the world of Buddhism exclusively from literary sources and from personal contacts with a small number of visitors from the Buddhist countries, until he travelled to Japan, already at the age of 73. He was invited by the Japan Foundation for a lecture tour in October, 1977. The Buddhists of Japan arranged a truly triumphal reception for Étienne Lamotte whom they respected as one of the foremost authorities for the knowledge of Indian Buddhism. When I visited Japan five years later, it was still reported in detail where he had given his lectures and where he has stayed.

By his work, Étienne Lamotte has fundamentally changed the state of

Buddhological research like very few others before him. Of his major publications, only his already mentioned dissertation of 1929 ("Notes sur la Bhagavadgītā") dealt with a theme of Hindu philosophy which had been a focus of his interest in those early years. His second book was already dedicated to the theme around which his work was centered for the rest of his life: the profound understanding and evaluation of the texts of classical Indian Mahāyāna and their philological and philosophical basis in early Buddhism. His first great work which is to be named here is *L'Explication des Mystères (Samdhinirmocanasūtra)*, published by the Université de Louvain, 1935. Here the Tibetan text of this sūtra of the Yogācāra school of Indian Mahāyāna is presented together with a translation. The Sanskrit original of the *Samdhinirmocanasūtra* has been lost. Consequently, Lamotte's work is based on the Tibetan as well as on the five surviving Chinese translations of the text. This translation is, like all works of this great scholar, characterized by an extraordinary degree of trustworthiness and accuracy, and it is supplemented by a detailed commentary with an overwhelming richness of information. With the French equivalents of philosophical and dogmatical terms are given, again like in all his later translations, the underlying Sanskrit words. By this method, an exact determination of the meaning of these terms remains independent on the so far not finally established translation of Buddhist technical terms.

Already in the following year, Lamotte published his translation of *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa*, entitled "Le Traité de l'Acte de Vasubandhu" (in: *Mélanges Chinoises et Bouddhiques*, vol. IV, 1936, pp. 1-144). This treatise deals with various theories concerning the doctrine of karma as proposed by different schools of early Buddhism. It is a work of the great philosopher Vasubandhu whose main work had been the subject of the magnum opus of Lamotte's teacher Louis de La Vallée Poussin. The *Karmasiddhiprakaraṇa* was again translated on the basis of the Tibetan and Chinese versions, because the Sanskrit original has been lost. This also applies to Lamotte's third great work written in this period, viz. *La Somme du Grand Véhicule (Mahāyānasamgraha) d'Asanga* (2 vols., Louvain, 1938-39), being one of the main treatises of the great master of Yogācāra, Asanga (4th cent. A.D.).

In 1944 the first volume of *Le Traité de la Grand Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra)* was published. It is a translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtrapadeśa* (Exposition of the great Sūtra of the Perfection of Wisdom). Five volumes with altogether 2451 pages of text and 151 of pages introductory matter have been published (I, 1944; II, 1949; III, 1970; IV, 1976; V, 1980), and Lamotte himself considered this work as his magnum opus. His rendering is based on the Chinese version of Kumārajīva (404-406 A.D.). Though Kumārajīva attributed it to the famous philosopher Nāgārjuna, Lamotte has shown that the *Upadeśa*—as he used to quote its title in its short form—has been the work of another author who lived in the northwestern parts of India in the 4th century A.D. It is a very comprehensive exposition

of classical Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism in contrast with the teachings of Śrāvakayāna (Hinayāna) which are interpreted here in accordance with the traditions and the philosophy of the Sarvāstivāda. Thus, the *Upadeśa* represents a real encyclopedia of Buddhism in which the doctrine of ancient Buddhism and the scholasticism of Abhidharma philosophy is presented in great detail, even more prolific than its refutation from the point of view of Mahāyāna which was propagated by the author of the *Upadeśa* himself. No doubt it is not by mere coincidence that Étienne Lamotte with his unprecedented encyclopedic knowledge of Buddhism has selected the task of exploring this work. The five volumes contain many thousands of comprehensive notes and thereby form a marvelous source of information on early and classical Buddhism. Many of these notes represent small monographs on particular doctrines, terms, legends and other traditions of Indian Buddhism. Étienne Lamotte has made the most extensive use of Western as well as of Japanese works of Buddhology, and he has evaluated a very large number of primary sources in Indian languages as well as from the Tibetan and Chinese Tripiṭaka. Lamotte was not permitted to see this work completed. The final part, together with an index, is being prepared now in the Institut du Hōbōgirin in Kyoto under the care of Lamotte's disciple, Hubert Durt.

Lamotte's most famous work is the *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien, des Origines à L'Ère Śāka* (Louvain, 1958). Only Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à L'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* of 1844, which is considered as the first compendium of scientific Buddhology, and Hermann Oldenberg's *Buddha: Sein Leben, Seine Lehre, Seine Gemeinde*, which marks the beginning of modern Buddhist studies, may be said to have been of similar importance for this field of research as Lamotte's *Histoire*. The history, the scriptures and traditions of early Indian Buddhism are dealt with in a most comprehensive way, taking into consideration Western as well as East Asian research. The importance of Lamotte's work has not yet been fully understood by all scholars, particularly because there is no English translation available yet. Fortunately, the publication of an English translation of Lamotte's book has now been projected for the foreseeable future. In any case, no serious research in the field of early Buddhism is possible any more without reference to Lamotte's work.

It was only three years later that Étienne Lamotte completed his translation of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa (L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti)*, (Louvain, 1962), which is one of the fundamental texts of Indian Mahāyāna. An English translation of this work has been published in 1976 by the Pali Text Society under the following title: *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti, Annotated Translation*. In 1965, Lamotte's translation of the *Śūramgamasamādhisūtra (La Concentration de la Marche Heroique)*, another famous text of the Madhyamaka school, appeared in Bruxelles.

Apart from these voluminous works Étienne Lamotte has written a number of important essays on central problems of Buddhology. Only a few

of them which have had a particularly great impact on the progress of research may be mentioned here. Buddhist Hermeneutics are dealt with in "La Critique d'Authenticité dans le Bouddhisme" (*India Antiqua*, Leiden, 1947, pp. 213-222). I should also list here Lamotte's study on the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism ("Sur la Formation du Mahāyāna," *Asiatica*, Festschrift F. Weller, Leipzig, 1954, pp. 377-396), his study "Le Bouddhisme des Laïcs" (*Studies in Indology and Buddhology* presented in honour of Professor S. Yamaguchi, Kyōtō, 1955, pp. 73-89) and the monographs on "Mañjuśrī" (*T'oung Pao*, vol. 48, 1960, pp. 1-96) and on "Vajrapāṇi en Inde" (*Mélanges de Sinologie offerts à M. Paul Demiéville*, Paris, 1966, pp. 113-159).

As mentioned above, Lamotte has been appointed a scientific advisor to the papal Secretariat pro non-Christianis. However, he has commented on the problem of the relation of Buddhism and Christianity only in few publications. In the lecture on "La Bienveillance Bouddhique" which he delivered before the Royal Academy in 1952 (*Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres . . .*, vol. 38, pp. 381-403) he dealt with the similarity and dissimilarity of the concepts of the Buddhist *maitrī* and the Christian charity. He does not believe in an ideological comparison as it is usually found in theological writing, but he stresses the necessity of understanding these concepts within the context of the systems of thought of Buddhism and of Christianity. By this way, the reader is provided with the information which is necessary for arriving at his own judgement. Similarly, Lamotte avoids the syncretistic tendencies which characterize much of the modern inter-religious dialogue. In "Suggestions Concerning Contact with the Buddhists" (*Bulletin of the Secretariat pro non-Christianis*, 1966, No. 3, pp. 127-137) he stresses that "rather than because they are radically opposed on religious or mystical ground, the Buddhist and the Christian religions differ because they have a different religious basis." These differences, he adds, "are not obstacles to those feelings of esteem and cordiality which men of goodwill naturally feel towards one another." On the other hand, one should clearly see the different religious basis which is exemplified by (1) different opinions regarding God, (2) the Buddhist wisdom which "penetrates the general characteristic of things and is aware of their impermanence, their painful nature, and above all their impersonality," (3) the Buddhist concept of Nirvana which "is neither a form of existence nor of non-existence," (4) the Buddhist way of meditation, and (5) the fact that "the Buddha is not truth, but he has discovered truth, and particularly the mechanism of production and the destruction of dependent phenomena."

In 1959 Étienne Lamotte delivered three lectures on ancient Buddhism at the invitation of the Fondazione Giorgi Cini in Venezia which were published under the title "Lo Spirito del Buddhismo Antico" in 1959 (English edition: "The Spirit of Ancient Buddhism", 1961). The same subject-matter was again dealt with in "Le Bouddhisme de Śākyamuni" (*Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen* 1983, No. 4) on which is based Lamotte's contribu-

tion "The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha" in *The World of Buddhism* (ed. by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, London, 1984, pp. 41-58) which was supplemented there by an essay on the fundamentals of Mahāyāna Buddhism (pp. 90-93). I do not know of any better, more concise or more exact summary of the Buddha's teachings.

At the occasion of Étienne Lamotte's 70th birthday, his friends and disciples published *Notice sur Mgr. E. Lamotte* (Louvain, 1972) with biographical documents and a comprehensive bibliography of his work. This bibliography was updated in the congratulatory volume of 1980 (*Indianisme et Bouddhisme, Mélanges Offerts à Mgr. Étienne Lamotte*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1980). A list of the more recent publications may be found in the obituary "In Memoriam Étienne Lamotte" in *Numen* (vol. 32, 1985, pp. 119-129).

Étienne Lamotte has bequeathed his large Buddhological library to the Institut du Hôbôgirin in Kyoto. His most important bequest to the world of learning is his published work which provides us with an unsurpassed richness of knowledge and insight into the nature of the Buddhist religion. In his personal life, he always tended to stand back behind his work. He was a modest, amiable and generous man who has lived up to the highest ideals of the two great religions to which he was bound by vocation and by inclination.

Heinz Bechert