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A Report on

The East-West
Philosophers' Conference

University of Hawaii

June 26 - August 4, 1939

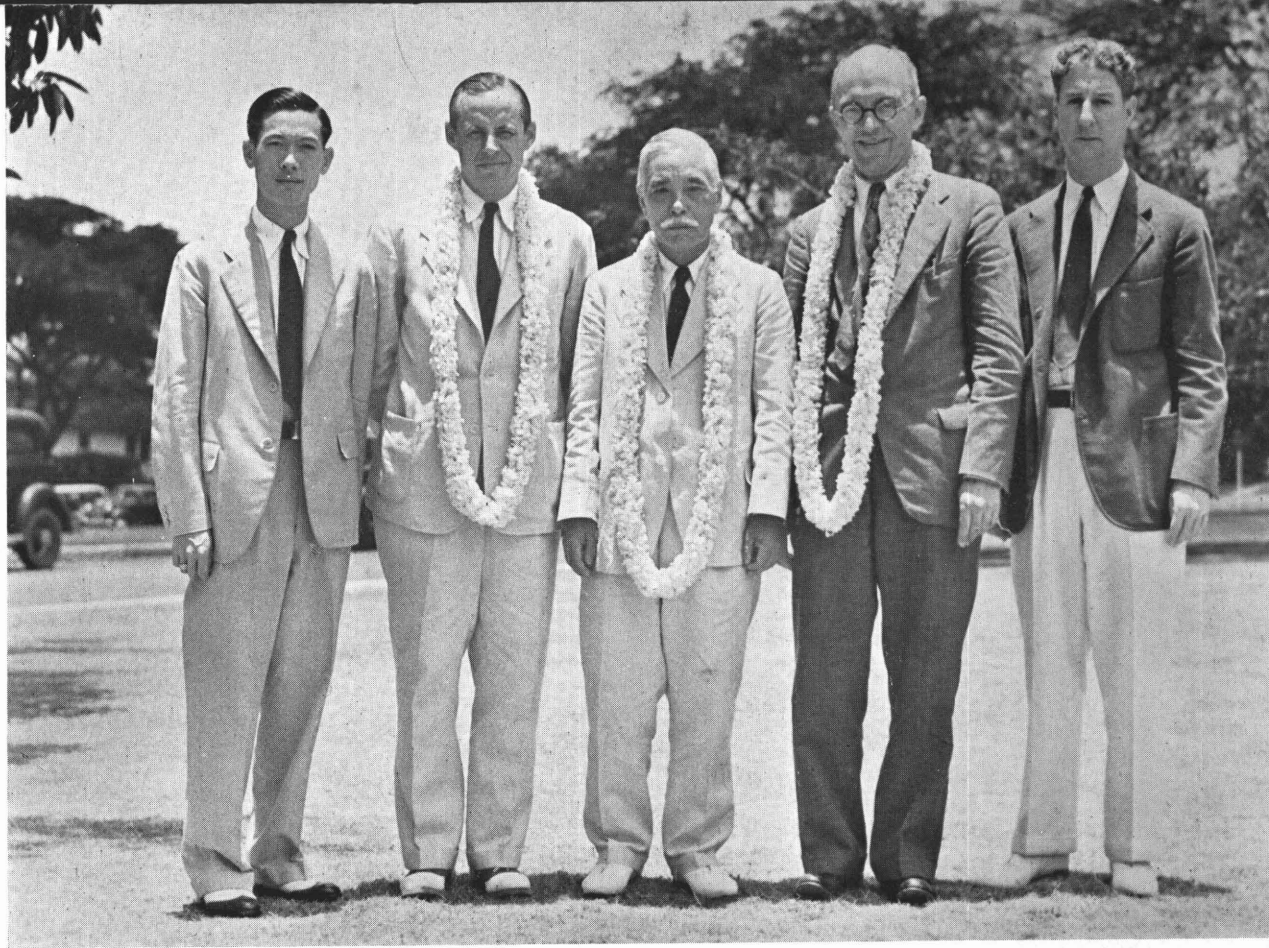
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Members of the University of Hawaii's East-West Philosophers' Conference include (left to right) Dr. Wing-tsit Chan, University of Hawaii; Dr. Filmer S. C. Northrop, Yale University; Dr. Junjiro Takakusu, Tokyo Imperial University; Dr. George P. Conger, University of Minnesota; and Dr. Charles A. Moore, University of Hawaii, chairman.

A Report on

The East-West Philosophers' Conference

University of Hawaii ~ June 26-August 4, 1959

IT IS a common error of Western scholars to assume that there is a single philosophy prevalent in the Orient, whereas the truth is that there are a number of philosophies as diverse from each other as are those of the Occident.¹ To a study of these our East-West Philosophers' Conference devoted itself for six weeks last summer (1959).²

While it is a fallacy to assume that Oriental Philosophies are completely different from and opposed to the philosophical spirit and tendency in the West, there were at least five attitudes noted by the Conference as characteristic of most of the great Asiatic systems and different from those of the West:

(1) METAPHYSICS

IN THEIR concept of ultimate Reality, the Oriental philosophies tend to agree in transcending or denying specific qualities and characteristics and descriptions. In

¹ There is a great variety of systems and types of philosophy as well as a wealth of more specific concepts, ideas and problems, many of them rather unique to the East. A quick glance would reveal such systems as Materialism (Charvaka), Naturalism (Taoism), Personalistic Spiritualism (Vedanta of Ramañana), Monistic Spiritualism (Vedanta of Sankara), Dualism (Sankhya), Idealism (Yogacara Buddhism), Nihilism or Relativism (Madhyamika Buddhism), Objective Idealism (Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng brothers and Chu Hsi), Subjective Idealism (Neo-Confucianism of Wang Yang-ming), Realism (Sarvastivada Buddhism) . . . and this is by no means an exhaustive list.

² For a list of persons who participated in this Conference see page 13.

Western philosophy generally there are many descriptions of Reality, but, in opposition to the Oriental attitude, each of these descriptions is specific, definite, clear-cut. In the Western concept, Reality is "God," or "Matter," or "Spirit," or "Energy," or "Mind," or "Person," or some other equally definite substance or quality. On the other hand, the tendency in the East has been to say that any such definite character or characteristic is mere appearance, whereas Reality itself is not this, not that, not any specific thing or quality. To put it another way, it might be said that any description of Reality falls short of the Truth, and fails to distinguish between Reality itself and the ways in which Reality appears. For example, "Brahman" in Brahmanism, "Tao" in Taoism, and the "Void" or "Suchness" in Buddhism are Reality, but in each case this ultimate Reality is not to be described in any specific, particular way.

It should be noted that although the word "Void" is recognized as a valid interpretation of the idea in Buddhism, it is not to be understood as meaning "nothing" in the sense of some form of Nihilism. The Conference adopted the word "Indeterminate" Reality as closest to the real meaning. Reality is not "void" but rather, "devoid," devoid of particular or special characteristics, or qualities or limitations.

Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that this concept of Reality is not characteristic of the Orient as a whole, but primarily only of the three systems mentioned, and not of such extremely important and influential systems as Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Mohism, Yin Yang, Shinto, some of the Buddhist schools, and several systems in India, some of which, in fact, are included among the so-called orthodox systems of Indian philosophy.

(2) STATUS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

IN THE Orient, in nearly every one of the great systems, the individual is relatively unimportant and in no system does the individual possess eternal or ultimate reality in the form of immortality of the individual as such. In the West, on the other hand, he is accepted as real and significant practically throughout the history of Western philosophy—as well as in Christianity, perhaps the most widespread

philosophical attitude in the West, where the individual is eternally real and ultimately valuable.

Specifically, the individual has little status in orthodox Hinduism, in Buddhism, and in Taoism; as for individual immortality as understood by the West, there is no such doctrine anywhere in the East: the loss of all ultimate individuality is characteristic of Hinduism;¹ in Buddhism the individual and the whole are merged as in the case of individual candlelights which merge with the great light, where no such distinction as that of the one and the many or the part and the whole is recognized; in all of the indigenous Chinese philosophies and in Shinto of Japan, life after death is temporary, the individual maintaining a sort of reality for a while before his eventual reabsorption into the elements.

On this point, however, the Conference found a variety of views and noted that the usual Western interpretation that the individual has no status in the Orient—e.g., the famous illustration of the drop of water returning to the ocean where it loses its self-identity,—is not a true description of the philosophy of the Orient as a whole. In fact, even this latter doctrine has been too quickly interpreted and judged by the West in terms of its standards. The idea—well worth serious consideration—in the least individualistic systems of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism is not the mere loss of individuality, but the enlargement and enrichment of the individual by realizing its kinship or identity with the ultimate principle of Reality. This is different from the spirit of Western philosophy, but it is not necessarily poor philosophy because it does not accord with Western attitudes. In fact, the Oriental is vehement in his criticism of the shortsightedness of the West in its continued clinging to the individual as ultimate, whereas the Oriental thinks it quite obvious that the ultimate unitary principle of Reality is the true Reality.

This monistic tendency, though it is decidedly prominent in the Orient, is not, however, all that the East has to say on the status of the individual. For example, the individual

¹ The Bhagavad-Gita seems to be closest to the idea of individual immortality, but even there ultimate identification with Brahma is the goal.

is recognized as real and significant in Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Mohism, and Neo-Mohism in China, in Shinto in Japan, in some of the unorthodox and even in some of the more orthodox systems of Indian philosophy; and, in fact, there is a rather real sense in which the individual is of great importance even in Buddhism, as explained in its doctrine of "self-creation," which is a state of continuous transformation, as in the case of milk becoming butter, or the candlelight which is a continuously changing flame. This is a doctrine of non-self ("anatman") in the sense of contrast to the theory of an eternal, changeless substratum or entity called a self or soul, but does not for that reason deny the individual as properly understood, as a dynamic, changing process.

(3) 'ENLIGHTENMENT'

WISDOM, or true knowledge of Reality, is frequently called "Enlightenment" by the Oriental, who expresses thereby an attitude which, at least to a great extent, is the opposite of the point of view of the West. Wisdom in the West takes the form of specific knowledge of the exact and definite nature of Reality—to know *what it is*. In the East, on the other hand, since Reality itself is conceived of as beyond all such definite descriptions, to have wisdom or to be "enlightened" means that one knows that Reality is beyond all such description, so that the goal of philosophy, Enlightenment, is the comprehension of Brahman, or Tao, or the Indeterminate ("Void" or "Suchness" or "Thusness") itself in its true nature. Thus, as in the case of the nature of Reality, so here in the matter of the ultimate state of knowledge, the Oriental attitude may be said to be fundamentally different from that in the West.

However, important modifications of the traditional Western understanding of the Oriental attitude were noted by the Conference as being necessary. The state of Enlightenment is not a religious ecstasy, although it is closely akin to the general attitude of the Mystic (of East and West). Also, this goal of "Enlightenment" is an important attitude only of the three philosophies mentioned above and, as was the case with reference to the doctrine of "Indeterminate"

Reality, it is not characteristic of the Orient as a whole. It is absent from philosophies which may be said to be the most prominent and important in both China and Japan, namely, Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and Shinto, as well as many less prominent systems in China and India.

(4) METHOD

IN KEEPING with the above attitudes toward the nature of Reality and the essential nature of philosophical knowledge or wisdom, the Orient, it was found by the Conference, agrees almost universally in recognizing intuition as the chief means of reaching the Truth. In this sense, since logic is relegated to a decidedly secondary position and since the method of scientific procedure is all but omitted entirely in the Oriental philosophical set-up (with the exceptions of Mohism and Neo-Mohism),¹ the *method* of Oriental philosophy was found to be quite different from that which is accepted as primary, if not essential, in all philosophical speculation in the West.

The matter of valid method in philosophy, East and West, constituted an extremely complicated problem for our Conference, calling for much formal treatment as well as repeated discussion. Among the significant items to be noted in this connection may be mentioned the following: the presence of intuition as a valid method in *Western* philosophy, whether it be recognized as such or not; the possible and even probable misunderstanding in the West generally of the true meaning of intuition as used by the East; the extremely important point that logic is used extensively in practically all of the Oriental philosophical systems,² and that two of the most prominent systems in the East, Nyaya in India and Neo-Mohism in China, are classified specifically as Logical Schools; the reasons given by the East for the acceptance of intuition as more valid

¹ Observation is emphasized in Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Mohism, and Shinto as a method complementary to Intuition.

² See Stcherbatsky's two volume *Buddhist Logic*; Hu Shih's *Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China*; any book of Jain logic; the *Nyaya Sutra* and commentaries, etc.

than logical reasoning as a means to the comprehension of ultimate reality, and the East's criticisms of the West's exclusive use of logic; that the rigor and subtlety of logical reasoning, when used, is just as great as in the West; and, finally, that practically every theory and idea presented is established by serious logical reasoning and defended against opponents by an equally convincing logical method.¹

The criticism of logic and the rejection of some of the basic laws of thought and of logic are based upon a synthetic view of reality and the notion that ultimate reality transcends distinctions and oppositions. In sharp contrast to the West's attitude of "either-or" the East, therefore, frequently makes use of the more synthetic concept of "both-and." This synthetic method is employed by practically all of the major systems of the East in one way or another. In view of this attitude—that reality transcends distinctions and opposition—it is obvious that intuition meets the needs of philosophical method far better than logical and analytical thinking.

In addition, it might be mentioned that the Conference also noted as a fallacy the belief that the East as a whole considers Revelation or Authority of the ancients as valid methods in philosophy² (except in the Vedas and the esoteric religious sects) and that, while the Orientals do show proper respect for the ancient views, they frequently modify them, many times almost beyond recognition. This is especially true in Buddhism, in so-called orthodox systems of India and in Neo-Confucianism in China.

"Meditation" in the form of mental and perhaps physical discipline as an aid in the search for "enlightenment" is recognized as essential in Hinduism (especially Yoga), in Jainism, and in Buddhism. In other systems such as Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Mohism, Shinto, however,

¹ For example, the extensive and systematic arguments for Idealism in the Yogacara School of Mahayana Buddhism; the arguments in proof of the principle of the Anatman (or non-ego) in Buddhism and the accompanying arguments against all schools which accept the doctrine of the Atman or Self.

² For example, Confucius, Buddha, the Vedas.

meditation is not accepted as a means to knowledge. Taoist philosophy advocates "concentration" without the technique of Hindu and Buddhist meditation.

(5) ETHICS AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

THE COMPLEXITY of this problem and the great variety of standards of conduct and ways of living in the systems of the East forced the Conference to the conclusion that it is impossible to speak of *the* philosophy of life of the Orient in general; accordingly it is invalid to apply to that attitude any general descriptions for purposes of comparison and contrast with the general ethical attitudes of the West.

It follows, therefore, that there is only partial validity in the frequently voiced belief in the West that the Oriental philosophy of life is "negative" or "passive" in method, leading to the ultimate goal of "release," "emancipation," "freedom," "peace," "contentment," or "quietude." According to this interpretation there is no significant place in the Oriental philosophy of life for such typical Western attitudes as individual self-realization in the sense of struggle and striving to make the most of everything in life in the pursuit of "happiness"; the acceptance of life^{as} of its full face value as real and significant; the positive and even aggressive spirit of any of the three basic philosophies of life in the West, namely, Hedonism, Naturalism (in the Nietzschean sense), or Idealistic Self-Realization. On the other hand, there is no place in the West for the "peace" or "contentment" philosophies.

This orthodox Western interpretation of the spirit of Oriental ethics was attacked by the Oriental members of the group as much too extreme in tone and too sweeping in application; this challenge to Western orthodoxy was a significant feature in the work of the Conference. The generally accepted conclusion was that the ethical systems of the East are many and varied and cannot be described in one word or phrase of characterization, but that, in general, the idea of moderation predominates with renunciation also important.¹

¹ Perhaps the best way to give an accurate picture is to mention the outstanding systems and their specific fundamental ethical teachings:

OTHER DIFFERENCES

THESE five distinctive attitudes are not, however, the only differences between the prevailing philosophies of East and West.

It should be noted that in the East there is virtually an absence of certain main types of metaphysical theory, especially materialism and dualism. The materialism of Charvaka in India dwindled into insignificance in the course of the history of thought while opposing theories prospered. Dualism, as found in Sankhya in India, Yin Yang in China, and even in Zoroastrianism in the Near East, is never ultimate dualism.

Hinduism: The performance of the duties of one's position in society through the four stages of life, culminating in the final period of asceticism and ultimate renunciation.

Confucianism: Full development of manhood both in the sense of self-development and the development of the various social relationships. Primary concept is *jen*, properly translated as "true manhood," to be developed through the two cardinal virtues of being true to one's self and reciprocity, and such ideals as filial piety, respect for elders, loyalty, fidelity, propriety, righteousness, honesty, and integrity.

Neo-Confucianism: Love and reverence.

Taoism: Simplicity, quietude, contentment, following destiny, fatalism. Also, "no self" (no egotism), "no achievement" (no ambition), and "no name" (no love of fame).

Buddhism: Practice of the middle-path through discipline, concentration, and wisdom, as expressed in renunciation, suppression of desires, compassion, charity, selflessness, self-restraint, abstinence, liberality, patience, benevolence, purity, veracity, righteousness.

Shinto: Discipline, duty, chivalry, "dare to die."

Thus it may be seen that no single or general characterization of Oriental ethics or philosophies of life would be accurate. It is equally clear, however, that there are prominent traces of an attitude of moderation, simplicity, quietude, contentment, and renunciation that is quite different from any of the outstanding attitudes of the West, with the possible exceptions of Stoicism, early Christianity, Spinoza, and Schopenhauer.

Again, there is the relative insignificance in the East of certain main types of ethical theory, such as Hedonism, Naturalism (in the Nietzschean or evolutionary sense) and, with the exception of Confucianism, Idealistic Self-Realization as a theory calling for full self-realization so that man seeks perfection consisting of the exercise of his many functions.

One notes, furthermore, that in the East there is a more direct relationship between the great philosophies and the actual modes of living by the peoples, as contrasted with what has been called the "academic" interest of Western philosophy, detached from everyday life.

EAST AND WEST NOT WHOLLY DIFFERENT

ON THE other hand, there are some important similarities between the philosophies of Occident and Orient. Both face and undertake to answer practically all of the basic general problems in the various fields of philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, logic, political thought, etc. More specifically, in metaphysics all of the "standard" problems are encountered in East as well as West: the meaning of "substance"; the status and nature of causality; the problem of permanence and change; the problem of evil; the relative status of mind and matter; the problem of time, etc.

In both East and West all of the great solutions of these various problems have been evolved.

Similar methods are used in both East and West in the sense of logical justification and defense of ideas—although logic is not a final authority in all Oriental systems.

MORE STUDY NEEDED

THE WEST must admit that it is less well informed about the philosophical and ethical systems of the East than the East is about the West. It will be to the advantage of the West to correct this inequality and to that end there should be much more attention given to the study of Oriental philosophies and ethics than now is the case in our universities and colleges.¹

¹ For the variety of systems, see footnote, page 1.

Much of this philosophy is highly significant for the West. Many of its ideas and attitudes are distinctively Oriental. Among the probable contributions of the East worthy of serious study might be mentioned: the concept of Indeterminate Reality; real monism; more direct interest in and effort to solve human problems by the means of philosophy; the validity of intuition and criticism of strictly logical reasoning as exclusively valid; the attitude of kinship of man and nature; the challenge of individualism; the philosophy of simplicity, contentment, renunciation, passivity—when properly understood. Here, too, are mentioned only a few of the many interesting and valuable offerings of the East.

Many of the outstanding Oriental systems have not been studied by the Occident generally, certainly not adequately. For example, both the objective and the subjective schools of Neo-Confucianism; Vaisesika pluralism; Sankhya realistic dualism; Yogacara Idealism of Buddhism; Madhyamika Nihilism or Relativism of Buddhism; the logical school of Nyaya, the Materialism of Charvaka, etc., etc. Most of the systems studied at all in the West are the ancient systems—greatly modified and improved in many cases by later developments.

Many of the important philosophical texts of the most important systems and schools have not yet been translated into any European language, and many more have not been translated into English, so that the West has “hardly scratched the surface” in its study of the full richness of Oriental philosophy. For example, *Yogacarabhumi Sastra* (most important text of idealism in Buddhism); *Avatansaka Sutra* (basic text of “Totalism” in Buddhism); *Satyasiddhi Sastra* (basic text of negativistic school of Buddhism); many important texts in the principal philosophy of China, Neo-Confucianism; as well as many texts from Vedanta, Sankhya, Jainism, etc., in India. This incomplete list indicates the sketchy knowledge of Oriental philosophy in the West.

Many of the most important ideas of the Orient, as well as entire systems, have been misunderstood or misinterpreted thus leading to unjustifiable criticism and neglect of

Oriental philosophy in general. Among the most frequently misinterpreted ideas are: the "Void" of Buddhism; monism in its several varieties; Meditation; Enlightenment; status of logical method; relation of philosophy and religion; pessimism; fatalism; ethics and philosophies of life, including such concepts as "Renunciation," "Inaction," "Negation," "Passivity," etc.

Scholars interested in research in this field would find it well worth while to make a comparative study of the philosophies and ethics of East and West, to clarify ideas and theories by comparative analysis. In the Conference this method was used to good advantage in clarifying the idea of Indeterminate Reality by comparison with the "field theory" of modern physics; also, in a study of the Buddhist "dialectic" of Nagarjuna by comparison with the theory of Hegel.

There is, also, a need to comprehend similarities and differences, discoverable in their true meanings by comparative examination. For example, to ascertain whether the Gita or Vedanta has anything different from, and therefore possibly significant for, the West on the question of immortality, we must compare and contrast their views with those, say, of Christianity.

It is important to test the attitudes of each by means of opposition and criticism from the other; for example, to study the limitations of logic by means of the East's rejection of that method as the source of ultimate validity, and, on the other side, to see the limitations of intuition through the West's criticism of this method.

It is possible to reach more valid evaluation of each by considering the comparative validity of the evidence in the case, the methods involved, and the significance of the results. It is obvious that one cannot evaluate a theory properly by assuming that one's own point of view is correct. For example, scholars in the West cannot assume that logic is the only valid method and, on the basis of that assumption, denounce any system which does not make equal use of that method.

Obviously, it is desirable to prevent provincialism in philosophy, whether of East or West, and to insure the "give and take" attitude through which alone *both* East and West may profit. Each has much to learn from the other in philosophy, but nothing can be gained either by remaining provincial in attitude or by merely defending one's own attitudes *against* the other's. Sincere comparative study guarantees greater consideration of, and respect for, differing and even opposing attitudes, to the benefit of both sides.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that Oriental philosophy must be correctly understood if the West would understand the Orient generally, whether in politics or in commerce, or otherwise; for in the East even more than in the West there is a close relationship between philosophy and the actual modes of living and acting by the peoples.

* * * *

The findings of the Conference, resulting from the readings of papers and the ensuing discussion, will be embodied in a volume now being prepared. It is to be titled, *Philosophy—East and West*, and will include chapters by the members and the contributing members. It will be ready for publication by March.

CHARLES A. MOORE, *Chairman*

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EAST-WEST PHILOSOPHERS' CONFERENCE



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¹ Although prevented at the last moment from coming to Honolulu, both Dr. Hocking and Dr. Suzuki contributed papers to the Conference.

² Dr. Sakamaki read a paper and led discussion on Shinto.

PAPERS PRESENTED

- DR. CHAN: An Outline of Chinese Philosophy.
The Individual in Oriental Philosophy.
The Spirit of Oriental Philosophy.
Chinese Metaphysics
- DR. CONGER: Methods and Basic Ideas of Indian
Philosophies (other than Buddhism).
Attempt at Comparison of Eastern and
Western Metaphysics.
Toward a Comparison of the Nature
and Status of Religion in Philosophy,
East and West.
- DR. HOCKING: Value of the Comparative Study of
Philosophy.
- DR. MOORE: Problems of East-West Philosophy.
Comparative Ethics and Philosophies
of Life.
- DR. NORTHROP: Toward a Comparative Analysis of the
Methods and Meanings of Eastern
and Western Philosophy.
- DR. SAKAMAKI: Shinto, Japanese Ethnocentrism.
- DR. SUZUKI: An Interpretation of Zen-Experience.
- DR. TAKAKUSU: Basic Ideas and Spiritual Inheritance
of Buddhism.
The Metaphysics of Indian and Bud-
dhist Philosophy.
Meditation as a Method of Attaining the
State of Perfect Freedom.