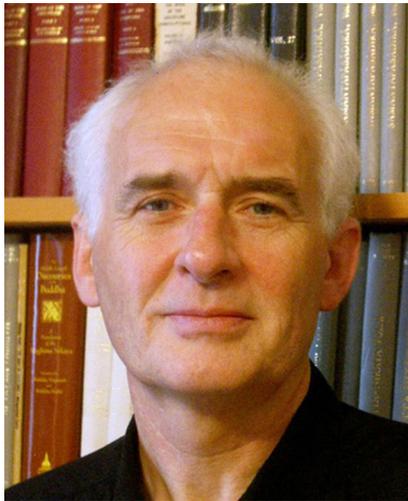




Exploring the Buddhist Middle Way from a Middle Ground: In Memoriam Steven Collins

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Steven Collins, distinguished scholar of Theravada Buddhism and of Pali language and literature, passed away unexpectedly on February 15, 2018 in New Zealand, where he had been giving an invited series of lectures and leading seminars. At the time of his death, he was Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago.

Steven Collins was born in London in 1951. The first in his family to attend university, Steven Collins went to the University of Oxford, where he was awarded Honor Moderations in *Literae Humaniores* (Greek and Latin Literature) in 1972 and Final Honors in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (P.P.P.), in the areas of Psychology and Philosophy, at Christ Church in 1974. As a graduate student, he studied Buddhism and Oriental Languages (focusing on

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Pali), while affiliated with Wolfson College and Exeter College. His studies in Classics and Philosophy at Oxford, however, guided and shaped all of his subsequent scholarship.

After receiving his D.Phil. in 1979 from the University of Oxford for a thesis on “Personal Continuity in Theravada Buddhism” (revised and published in 1982 as *Selfless Persons; imagery and thought in Theravada Buddhism* [Cambridge University Press]), Steven Collins taught at Bristol University in the United Kingdom (1980–87), Indiana University Bloomington (1987–89), and Concordia University in Montreal (1989–91), before finally joining the faculty at the University of Chicago.

Steven Collins is well-known for the many important books and articles that he published. After *Selfless Persons*, he published *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali imaginaire* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); *A Pali Grammaire for Students* (Silkworm Press, 2006); a series of lectures delivered at the L'École pratique des hautes études à Paris, *Civilisation et femmes célibataires dans le buddhisme en Asie du Sud et du Sud-east* (Les Éditions du Cerf, 2011); a collection of essays, *Self and Society* (Silkworm Press, 2013); and he edited a collection of essays on *The Vessantara Jataka* (Columbia University Press, 2016). He left at the time of his death a manuscript on the topic of the varieties and civilizational place of wisdom and on Buddhist practices of the self; it is expected that this will be published posthumously.

Steven Collins' legacy in scholarship is not limited to his own publications. He was central to graduate studies at the University of Chicago not only in his own department, South Asian Languages and Civilizations, but also in the programs in History of Religions and Philosophy of Religions at the Divinity School there. Steven Collins' legacy in scholarship also endures in the continuing collaborative work of the Theravada Civilizations Project, which he co-founded (in 2011) and co-led until his death with Juliane Schober (see <http://theravadaciv.org/about/>). He was also a dedicated member of the Pali Text Society Council for many years and he often worked behind the scenes bringing work to publication on behalf of others; this included preparing for publication the last work of Miss I.B. Horner, long-time President of the P.T.S, her translation of the *Paññāsa Jātaka*. Steven Collins also prepared for publication the work of his colleague at Concordia, Lynn Teskey Denton, that remained unpublished due to her untimely decease (*Female Ascetics in Hinduism* [State University of New York Press, 2004]).

Steven Collins' legacy in scholarship also continues in far more intangible but nonetheless significant way; his legacy is an instance of the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in Chaos Theory. There is no doubt that Steven Collins was a true intellectual and that he had a powerful intellect. He knew how to use his scholarly gifts and virtues to excellent effect. He listened to others carefully, and was always able to ask incisive questions that opened up new possibilities. These abilities have been well described by Dan Arnold in a memorial:

[Steven Collins] would put a question that cut right to the heart of the matter, bringing sharply into relief for everyone the intellectual stakes of whatever was at issue. Coupled with the fact that he would typically look rather pained in expressing his query (Steve was fond of saying in this regard that he simply found it painful to *think*), the incisiveness of his questions surely made many a learned scholar uncomfortable; but while they might thus occasion some squirming, his questions were unfailingly fair,

pertinent, interesting, and strikingly smart. (<https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/memory-steven-collins>)

Steven Collins could appear to be intellectually irascible at times, but he was also a very kind man. Many, including myself, know just how varied and skillful his acts of kindness were. He had a gentle ability to encourage others even at moments of their sharpest self-doubts and insecurities, feelings all-too-familiar to many students and scholars. As one scholar said to me after his death, “every time I met him he was open, friendly, encouraging. I always felt I could do whatever I put my mind to and that my work was worth continuing and sharing after I spoke with him.”

Steven Collins’s legacy in scholarship also lies especially in the interpretive model that he set for all of us interested in the study of Asian intellectual traditions and especially for all of us concerned with the connections and interstices between philosophical work and the human sciences. This means that his legacy to philosophical study is not limited to the arguments of such works as *Selfless Persons*, as important as these continue to be for the philosophical investigation of and reflection on the self and personal identity. A wider legacy also lies in the example that Steven Collins set in showing “that in the study of Buddhism a concern with detailed accuracy in philological and textual specifics can be combined with a discussion of wider (and difficult) philosophical and sociological issues” (from the book description for *Self and Society*).

To trace the contours of Steven Collins’s interpretive example, to bring it into better view, one must first see just how different his intellectual approach is from scholars working in the field of the Study of Religion (an academic field with which Collins was often at his most irascible intellectually); from scholars working in fields connected with area studies (even though Collins was a faculty member of an area studies department; he also had appointments in university units dedicated to the Study of Religion); and from scholars working as ethnographers and anthropologists in the study of Theravada Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia (even though such scholars were among some of his closest colleagues).

Steven Collins did not organize his own scholarship fundamentally around the more conventional aggregative terms like ‘religion,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘historical period,’ or ‘culture,’ although he certainly was fully conversant with scholarship on Theravada Buddhism that did use such categories and was always very astute about the best lessons for us from this scholarship. Instead, Steven Collins’ scholarship is organized around categories that are of a quite different order than the aggregative terms above. We can see Collins setting this problematic out in an essay that is, for me, one of his most important essays for helping to take the measure of his overall approach, “Categories, Concepts, or Predicaments? Remarks on Mauss’ Use of Philosophical Terminology;” it was published in a collection that he edited together with Michael Carrithers and Steven Lukes, *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (Cambridge University Press, 1985):

It is common to find anthropologists, sociologists, intellectual historians and others, as well as philosophers, using philosophical terminology of *categories of thought* to refer to the more or less fundamental ideas, concepts, or simply patterns of thinking which are found in different cultures and different historical periods. When these ‘categories’ are viewed as organized (more or less) into a

system, we are then often said to be confronted with different frameworks, perspectives, world-views, or—more drastically—*different worlds*. The purpose of this chapter is to examine what Durkheim and Mauss might have meant by speaking in this way; and secondarily to raise some general issues relevant to the use of this philosophical vocabulary in cultural or social description and analysis.(46)

Steven Collins's continuing focus on fundamental categories and ideas that are like what was said in old advertisements about "Certs" ("is it a breathmint, or is it a candy?") in so far as they are simultaneously central in our efforts to discern and describe similarity as well as difference is one of the most distinctive features of Collins' approach to the intellectual resources of the "Middle Way" of Buddhism. The more conventional aggregative terms like 'religion,' 'tradition,' 'historical period,' or 'culture' are used as tools more for discerning only one half of what engaged Collins, the "different frameworks, perspectives, world-views, or—more drastically—*different worlds*" that confront us. Collins pushed to get self-consciously to a hermeneutically-constituted "middle ground," a category that itself is familiar in various traditions of philosophy around the world, for example, in Plato's discussions of *metaxy*, as a privileged place "in-between" that affords better perception and ultimately better understanding. Quite regularly, Collins turned to contemporary French thinkers for sustained orientation towards the fundamental categories that he wanted to understand better. These include Marcel Mauss, as in the essay quoted above, Louis Dumont, Jacques LeGoff, Paul Ricoeur, Pierre Hadot, and most recently, Michel Foucault; it would be a valuable philosophical exercise to go back to each of these important thinkers and read them again "in the light of Collins."

Steven Collins' scholarly example in combining a concern with detailed accuracy in philological and textual specifics with an engagement with wider and fundamental philosophical and sociological issues suggests a generative middle ground in which questions of philosophical anthropology can be explored while being illuminated by the insights of the general human sciences. His scholarly legacy is thus a resource not only for those interested in the study of Buddhism, but for all those concerned with Philosophy in the twenty-first century. His scholarly life is also testimony to what Pierre Hadot has recently reminded us: philosophy is indeed a way of life.