

FIFTY YEARS OF BUDDHIST STUDIES IN BRITAIN*

RICHARD GOMBRICH

In 1997 a conference was held in Bangkok to survey the state of Buddhist studies internationally over the previous twenty-five years; it was organised by the Center for Buddhist Studies of Chulalongkorn University under Dr Wit Wisadavet, Director of the Center. A scholar was invited from each of some fifteen countries in which Buddhist studies could be presumed to flourish – which is more or less the same as saying, where the subject could be studied at university level. I enjoyed the conference. I found it entertaining to observe how people conformed to the expected national stereotypes. The Germans (who, incidentally, were represented by an Israeli) equated Buddhist studies with textual and historical research on Buddhism and barely even mentioned the social sciences, even though German scholarship has made notable contributions in that area. The Americans perfectly complemented the Germans, in that they mentioned only work in the social sciences, if one may include under that rubric empirical work on contemporary phenomena carried out under the rubric of ‘religious studies’ – work that so often turns out to be simply rather mediocre anthropology.

While the Germans presented a vast bibliography, the American presentation did not attempt to include anything like a comprehensive bibliography, but instead ran way over time and characterised each individual work discussed as ‘stunning’. The French were lightly ironic and always to the point; the Koreans were humorous; the Japanese earnest. The Burmese delegate was so frightened that he did not dare mention

* This was originally delivered on 15 September 2004 as a paper to the Fiftieth Anniversary Conference of the British Association for the Study of Religion at Harris-Manchester College, Oxford. I was to speak for thirty minutes, so naturally made no attempt to be exhaustive.

any research done within the prescribed period. At least I did not have that problem.

What the Thai organisers really wanted to know was how the rest of the world saw 'engaged Buddhism'. Were Buddhist studies being pursued only in an entirely detached spirit, or was Buddhism being used to offer values and insights in other academic areas, such as politics or ecology? I suspect that they were rather disappointed at finding themselves alone in this concern; and this may largely explain the somewhat unsatisfactory aftermath of the conference. A volume containing versions (some radically revised) of ten of the papers, plus an introduction, finally appeared in 2000.¹ Thus material which was in any case doomed to obsolescence appeared in print only when approaching its sell-by date. Each contribution was now equipped with a bibliography, but – perhaps through some misguided notion of fairness – this included only books, not articles, so that much of the material some of us had gone to great pains to assemble was wasted.² And misprints abounded. In short, the proceedings as published serve best to illustrate the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence and unsatisfactoriness.

This experience serves me as a kind of parable. *Scripta manent*, the Latin tag rightly has it: It is writings that endure. So yes, there is much to be said for the traditional scholarly view: that a survey of what has been achieved in an academic field should consist first and foremost of a bibliography. Although in general information services have vastly improved in the past fifty years, Buddhist studies are unfortunate: the admirable ongoing bibliography *Bibliographie Bouddhique* stopped publishing in 1967, its last volume covering only up to May 1958. I suppose that as the general rate of publication increased, it became more and more difficult to produce a comprehensive bibliography of the field,

¹ Donald K. Swearer and Somparn Promta, eds, *The State of Buddhist Studies in the World 1972–1997*, Bangkok: Center for Buddhist Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2000.

² It may however be useful if I reproduce from Donald Swearer's introduction his first footnote: 'For earlier assessments of the state of Buddhist studies, see Edward Conze, 'Recent Progress in Buddhist Studies', *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968); J.W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (Tokyo, Kosei Publishing Company, 1997); Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1987).' (Swearer and Promta, p. viii.)

while on the other hand search engines such as Google make it seem easy to find what one needs on the Internet, and publishing printed volumes seems impossibly slow by contrast. As anyone can, I have rapidly located on the Internet a 'Bibliography of Buddhist Studies Bibliographies in Western Languages', fourteen pages long; but it was last updated in March 2001, and most of the items are either bibliographies of narrowly defined areas like the Lotus Sutra or of extremely broad areas, such as whole countries or fields like 'Indian philosophy', within which one would have to trawl for oneself. Besides, very few of the bibliographies seem to be critical. Moreover, that they only deal with western languages is obviously a major deficiency. Incidentally, the British contribution in this area has been pitifully modest.

Maybe the very idea of a comprehensive bibliography of Buddhist studies is now obsolete. It could be argued that as it has grown, the field of Buddhist studies has, inevitably, become so divided that such a compilation would interest hardly anyone, since – to take examples at random – a new scholarly edition of the writings of a Korean Soen master would be of no concern whatever to an anthropologist of Sinhalese Buddhism, and vice versa. I would argue nevertheless that specialisation brings losses as well as gains. The hazardous enterprise of trying to grasp the big picture is unpopular, even sometimes despised, within academia, but quite the opposite with the general public on whose patronage the scholarly work so largely depends. So I for one feel that a constantly updated and comprehensive bibliography would still be a valuable work of reference.

However, the lesson I have learnt from the Chulalongkorn experience is that a survey of an academic field should not consist primarily of a list of publications, for besides being indigestible to a live audience this very soon becomes dated. When we assess progress in a field like Buddhist studies which, whether we like it or not, is highly specialised, we need the perspective of a still wider context. The fate of a particular academic field cannot but be linked to that of higher education in general. I know that it constantly appears to us that our field is in decline, if not in crisis, if not under threat of extinction in Britain. And yet when we compare where we are now with where we were fifty years ago, we get a jolt. When I came up to Oxford as a student in 1957, the University

employed no one to teach Buddhism, and I don't think it figured on any syllabus, undergraduate or postgraduate. I believe the same was true of Cambridge. That reminds us, while we bemoan decline, how radically things have improved. It is true that the greatest advances were probably made some time back, in the sixties and seventies. But the main reason for our apparently paradoxical perception must be that higher education overall has so greatly expanded that even if the exiguous percentage of its resources and personnel devoted to studying Buddhism has, say, halved, that still means a huge increase in teaching posts and library facilities.

Another global trend from which we have benefited – as must be obvious to this audience – is the virtual creation of Religious Studies as a separate academic field. (I hesitate to call it a 'discipline'.) The first chair of Comparative Religion in Britain was created at Manchester University in 1903 and its first occupant was the great scholar of early Buddhism, T. W. Rhys Davids. As we all know, however, the establishment of Religious Studies in the British university system must stand largely to the credit of another Buddhologist, Ninian Smart; he first occupied the chair in this subject at Lancaster University, where he set up a department in 1967. Luckily a few of his direct disciples are still among us and provide my story with a pleasing thread of continuity.

The greatly expanded and somewhat systematised study of non-Christian religions must in turn be linked to the fortunes of faith communities, who provide both demand and supply. When this Association was formed in 1954, it was natural to make it primarily an association for the study of the history of religions, i.e., of their past, because their living presence was not a salient feature of the local landscape. The immigration which sharply increased at around that time, and the consequent rise in the population from non-Christian religious traditions, began to make it reasonable to regard Britain as a multi-cultural society. The impact was not immediate; but as the non-Christian immigrants began to send their children to school, it became necessary to cater for them in primary and secondary education. Here too, Ninian Smart was a pioneer: in 1969 he played a leading part in creating the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education. This small body of volunteers tried to offer the school system – and to some extent also other

public services such as hospitals and the police, plus any inquirers from the general public – at least a minimum of accurate and not unsympathetic information about living non-Christian traditions as now found in Britain. For most of the period under survey, the Shap Working Party has annually published and distributed both a calendar of religious festivals and a compilation (known as the ‘Shap Mailing’), aimed specially at schoolteachers, which takes a new theme each year and contains articles on that theme applied to various religions.

Once these religious traditions were taught in schools, it became necessary to train teachers, and even in due course school inspectors, who knew something about them. This in turn meant jobs for some graduates of university departments of Religious Studies. This then led to a rise in standards and to formal examinations, so that it became possible to take ‘A’ levels in Religious Studies with papers devoted to specific non-Christian religions.

Because of the pattern of immigration, Buddhism benefited less from these developments than did Islam, Hinduism and even Sikhism. When I first joined the Shap Working Party, an extremely well-meaning senior figure, who was I believe responsible for the teaching of non-Christian religions throughout the Birmingham area, told me that Buddhism was not suitable for children, by which he meant that it was too intellectual and abstruse. It was Peggy Morgan who coined the response ‘Buddhists have children too’, and who began producing materials suitable for teaching Buddhism to children in British primary schools.

On the other hand, in higher education Buddhism has benefited from a tragedy and a success. The tragedy has been the Chinese invasion of Tibet. In particular, the conquest of Lhasa and the flight to India in 1959 of the Dalai Lama have had massive consequences for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism across the world and the academic study of Tibet. The Tibetan exodus was initially into India, where the majority of the Tibetan Sangha have stayed, but significant numbers have gone on to North America and, secondarily, to Europe.

Fifty years ago I don’t think there was a department of Tibetan studies at any university in the world, and there was certainly no international organisation for the subject. Now many universities, including Oxford and SOAS, teach the Tibetan language and Tibetan studies; and the

recent international conferences of the International Association for Tibetan Studies have been better attended than the corresponding meetings of the International Association for Sanskrit Studies. Tibetan studies are of course not all about Buddhism, but surely well over half of them are.

The success to which I have just alluded is the Japanese economic miracle. Japanese efforts to export their culture have not been in proportion to their economic clout – and one could say the same, later, of the Koreans. Nevertheless, some Japanese Buddhist organisations have been generous in supporting the study of Buddhism abroad, not least in Britain. The most notable donor has been the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, The Society for the Advancement of Buddhist Understanding, also known among us as the Numata Foundation, after its founder. In the 1980s Mr Yehan Numata, from his base in Tokyo, began to found chairs in Buddhist studies in the western world. There was some variation, but the general pattern was for a university to have a visiting scholar to teach each year, paid for by the BDK; and extra money was also paid, with the intention of endowing a permanent chair.

Though Mr Numata himself was an adherent of Jodo Shinshu, the Pure Land Buddhist tradition founded by Shinran, the BDK has wisely and nobly supported Buddhist studies in general. Oxford was the first British university to benefit: an annual visiting fellowship, attached to Balliol College, began in 1989. Later SOAS and Cambridge received benefactions from the same source. With my retirement, it is greatly hoped that the visiting position at Oxford can be converted into a permanently endowed chair, as Mr Numata originally envisaged. This would be the first endowed chair in Buddhist studies not merely at Oxford but at any British university.

In my contribution to the Chulalongkorn survey I published a table headed 'British institutions offering teaching in Buddhism at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level' (pp. 176–8). The only centre for Buddhist studies which then (in 1997) existed in Britain had recently been founded at Bristol University under the leadership of Paul Williams. How did this come about? Bristol's Department of Theology and Religious Studies had already acquired a reputation in Buddhism, and this in turn arose partly because Bristol, alone of all British universities,

had two posts in the field. So how did that happen? Most of the credit must go to Professor Denis Nineham; but a little also to me. When approaching the end of a distinguished academic career, Prof. Nineham made a surprise move: he resigned as Warden of Keble College, Oxford, and went to head the department at Bristol. Whether he went on condition that the department would be expanded or whether he persuaded the university authorities to do it after he got there I do not know, but the university then advertised a new post in Buddhist studies. Two of my pupils, Paul Williams and Steve Collins, both applied. They were close friends and I thought the world of both of them, so I accepted the awkward task of writing a reference for both. I wrote a very long letter, explaining that both of them were so good – and yet so different – that it was impossible for me to give my preference to either: both fully deserved the job. Professor Nineham then managed to offer jobs to both, by appointing Paul to a vacant position in the philosophy of religion. Even after Steve Collins left for America, the two posts were retained and his post was advertised, which is how we come to have Rupert Gethin here with us now.

Certain other institutional landmarks deserve to be at least briefly recorded. In 1976 the energy and vision of Professor A. K. Narain, who had then moved from Benares to the University of Wisconsin, founded the International Association of Buddhist Studies and its journal, the *International Journal of Buddhist Studies*. Here in Britain Peter Harvey, Ian Harris and colleagues founded the UK Association for Buddhist Studies, which has held an annual conference since 1996. Though they published somewhat irregularly, there were already two British journals of Buddhist studies, the *Journal of the Pali Text Society* and the *Pali Buddhist Review*, the latter originally a one-man enterprise by Russell Webb. In 1983–84 Russell's journal broadened its scope and editorship to become the *Buddhist Studies Review*, and in 1998 this became the official organ of UKABS. Russell has recently announced his retirement from the editorship and we must all be grateful to him for his great contribution to our field. Other important innovations have involved use of the Internet. Damien Keown and Charles Prebish were founding editors of the electronic *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* (website: <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk>). Peter Harvey, of the University of Sunderland, has pioneered serious

distance learning with his web-based MA in Buddhist Studies, which began in 2002 (<http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/buddhist>); in 2005, it will include a module on Pali.

If I try to survey the intellectual trends in Buddhist studies in Britain over the last fifty years, I do not see how I can avoid repeating some of what I said in my Chulalongkorn paper.

Perhaps the most notable intellectual development 'has been the growth, from an almost non-existent base, of the anthropological (and, to a lesser extent, sociological) study of Buddhist communities and traditions. In this area it is undoubtedly Theravada Buddhist studies that have led the field,' especially in Britain. In 1971 I published my first book, *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon*.³ This book appeared just after two comparable full-scale anthropological studies of Buddhism in Burma and Thailand respectively: Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*⁴ and S. J. Tambiah's *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*.⁵ Spiro's book has no connection with Britain, but Tambiah's was written while he was teaching at Cambridge (he later moved to Harvard), and was followed while he was still there by *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*.⁶ The literature on modern Thai Buddhism was further enriched in this period by Jane Bunnag's *Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman: A Study of Urban Monastic Organization in Central Thailand*.⁷

Within Britain this scholarly tradition was carried forward by Michael Carrithers' *The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*⁸ and David Gellner's *Monk, Householder and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and Its Hierarchy of Ritual*,⁹ both books are based on Oxford doctoral theses. It is regrettable that (so far as I know) Gustaaf Houtman has not published his SOAS PhD

³ Oxford: Clarendon Press. A revised edition was published as *Buddhist Precept and Practice*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991.

⁴ New York: Harper & Row, 1970; 2nd revised edn, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1982.

⁵ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

⁶ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

⁷ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

⁸ Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.

⁹ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

thesis, 'Traditions of Buddhist Practice in Burma' (1990), which contains much fascinating material. Although it was written while he was teaching in Australia, Geoffrey Samuel's book *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*¹⁰ must be included in this series of major anthropological monographs. Gananath Obeyesekere and I together published *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*.¹¹ The works of Carrithers, Gellner and Samuel, as well as (I hope) my own are informed by that sensitivity to a culture which cannot be acquired without a thorough knowledge of its language; they also have in common an interest in the diachronic as well as the synchronic dimension of their subjects. The social study of Buddhism is being carried forward by Cathy Cantwell and Geoffrey Samuel (Tibetan Buddhism), David Gellner (Newar and Japanese Buddhism), Ian Reader (Japanese Buddhism), Hiroko Kawanami (Burmese Buddhism) and several excellent scholars who study Buddhist practice in Britain itself. In the last category I must single out for mention the monograph *A Time to Chant: The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain*¹² by the distinguished British sociologist Bryan Wilson and his Belgian co-author Karel Dobbelaere.

Among the more traditional lines of Buddhological research, it is perhaps philological and doctrinal studies of the Theravāda which have flourished most in Britain. K. R. Norman's contribution to Pali studies can hardly be over-emphasised, and was recognised by a special number of *Indo-Iranian Journal* in his honour (vol. 35, 1992). Besides his magisterial editions and translations of Pali canonical texts, there are his history of Pali literature in the Harrassowitz *A History of Indian Literature* series (1983),¹³ and his *Collected Papers*, so far amounting to seven volumes, published by the Pali Text Society.¹⁴ Many further contributions to scholarship of this general character are gathered in the PTS *Journal*. Dr. Margaret Cone is being employed by the PTS to write what will be essentially a new version of its *Pali-English Dictionary*¹⁵ (originally by Rhys

¹⁰ Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

¹¹ Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988.

¹² Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹³ *Pāli Literature*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983.

¹⁴ Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1996–2001.

¹⁵ London: Pali Text Society, 1921–25.

Davids and Stede); the first of three projected volumes has appeared,¹⁶ and this will in due course make an enormous contribution to the study of Pali and hence of Buddhism.

It is not always sensible to try to draw a line between a really good introduction to a subject and a contribution to scholarship. Though there are probably too many introductions to Buddhism on the market, in this area we seem to do rather well. For example, Michael Carrithers' *The Buddha*¹⁷ may contain nothing which a scholar would find absolutely new, but its mere appearance in the Oxford University Press *Past Masters* series (and now in the *Short Introduction To* series) and its excellent literary style make it a significant contribution to Buddhist studies. I hope the same can be said for the lavishly illustrated book which I edited with Heinz Bechert: *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and History*.¹⁸ Similarly, the books which Paul Williams (*Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*)¹⁹ and I (*Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*)²⁰ contributed to the Routledge series of books on world religions are primarily intended to serve as college textbooks or introductions for the general reader, but do also contain some original material. Williams' book has been particularly successful and has been translated into Italian; mine has appeared in German. I understand that Andrew Skilton's *A Concise History of Buddhism*²¹ has been used as an introductory course textbook by at least one famous American scholar of Buddhism. Peter Harvey's *Introduction to Buddhism*²² has been even more widely acclaimed and is being translated into several languages. Still more recently, we greeted excellent introductory works by Paul Williams (with Anthony Tribe)²³ and by Rupert Gethin.²⁴

¹⁶ *A Dictionary of Pāli. Part I: a–kh*, Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2001.

¹⁷ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

¹⁸ London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1984.

¹⁹ London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989.

²⁰ London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988.

²¹ Birmingham: Windhorse, 1994.

²² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

²³ *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, London: Routledge, 2000.

²⁴ *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

In the vast field of Mahāyāna studies, it is notable that work on the Indo-Tibetan tradition has been comparatively flourishing, even though until recently SOAS was the only university officially to offer a regular course in Tibetan. David Snellgrove, who for many years was the Tibetan teacher at SOAS, is no longer active in the field, and much of his work is perhaps being superseded, but he deserves great credit (and was accorded a *Festschrift* (1990)) for laying foundations and stimulating interest. The current doyen in this field is Professor David Seyfort Ruegg, whose eminence as a Buddhologist was recognised by his election as President of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, and by a volume of papers published in his honour.²⁵ Important recent translations and monographs in this field include the books of Martin Boord,²⁶ Rob Mayer,²⁷ Ulrich Pagel²⁸ and Bulcsu Siklos.²⁹ Paul Williams, who writes primarily as a philosopher (though his philological skill is impeccable), has been very productive, especially on the dGe lugs pa school.

I have omitted many areas, but I did warn you that I was not out to produce a catalogue. Let me now become a trifle self-indulgent and say that the development in Buddhist studies which interests me most personally is the revival, since about 1990, in investigating the earliest Buddhism, which I take to be that of the Buddha himself and that of his immediate disciples. In this area I think a revolution has occurred, though I am not sure that everyone has noticed. Until about ten years ago, the book that I invariably recommended to beginners was *What the Buddha Taught*³⁰ by Walpola Rahula. That book is still constantly reprinted, and deservedly so. But nowadays when I recommend it I say

²⁵ Tadeusz Skorupski and Ulrich Pagel (eds), *The Buddhist Forum: vol. 3, 1991–1993: Papers in Honour and Appreciation of Professor David Seyfort Ruegg's Contribution to Indological, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994.

²⁶ *The Cult of the Deity Vajrakīla According to the Texts of the Northern Treasures Tradition of Tibet*, Tring: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1993.

²⁷ *A Scripture of the Ancient Tantra Collection: the Phurpa bcu-gnyis*, Stirling: Kiscadale, 1996.

²⁸ *The Bodhisattvapaṭika: Its Doctrines, Practices and Their Position in Mahāyāna Literature*, Tring: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1995.

²⁹ *The Vajrabhairava Tantras: Tibetan and Mongolian Versions*, Tring: Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1996.

³⁰ Bedford: Gordon Fraser, 1959.

that I can no longer accept the title at face value. I regard the book as an admirable introduction to the Buddha's teachings as interpreted by Buddhaghosa, in other words to the Theravāda tradition. But I feel that when we study Buddhism as a historical phenomenon we should take seriously the Buddha's own dictum that all phenomena in this world are liable to change and decay. By this I do not mean that I regard all change as bad or undesirable. What I mean is that in the four centuries between the Buddha's lifetime and the writing down of the Pali canon the religion must have changed, and gone on changing thereafter, for there is no recorded example of an institution or ideology remaining unchanged for such a long time. Therefore scholars are free to examine the early texts critically and need not follow the interpretations of the commentaries if they see good reason not to.

The most remarkable application of this principle has perhaps been Sue Hamilton's book *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*.³¹ I feel that this book has not yet had the recognition it deserves. By a most scrupulous examination of the canonical texts, Sue has argued, to my mind convincingly, that the Buddha did not preach that no such thing as a soul (whatever that might be) exists, but that the question of its existence was not relevant to what concerned him and should concern us: how to attain salvation – nirvana. The Buddha, Sue maintains, was not preaching an ontology at all, but was only concerned with experience. Since we could never experience a self, the Buddha argued, we should not bother about it all. In a recent Oxford DPhil Noa Gal builds on Sue's discovery in a most fruitful and interesting way and shows how Buddhism came to develop an ontology and so subtly change its doctrines. Her book is about to be published by RoutledgeCurzon as the first volume in the monograph series of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies.³²

It is not really surprising that the Pali commentaries show little awareness of the Buddha's historical context, and in particular of the teachings which he was opposing. They thus failed to notice that there

³¹ Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000.

³² Now published: Noa Ronkin, *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005; the subject of a review article in the present issue of *Buddhist Studies Review*, pp. 175–94 (Editor).

are indubitable allusions in the *sutta*-s to the Upaniṣads, especially the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. It is more surprising that this had until recently also escaped the attention of modern commentators. Moreover, it is quite clear that some passages in the *sutta*-s must have been transferred from their original contexts to others in which they do not make good sense, and that the commentaries ascribed to Buddhaghosa offer varying and inconsistent interpretations of these passages. I gave striking instances of both phenomena in my short article 'Three souls, one or none'.³³ No one who reads that article can remain in doubt that there are inconsistencies both between *sutta*-s and between commentaries, so trusting in the inerrancy of every word is no longer an option.

I suggested in 'The Buddha's Book of Genesis?'³⁴ that the cosmogony propounded in the *Aggañña Sutta* is best understood as a parody of Vedic cosmogony. In my book *How Buddhism Began*³⁵ I combined these concerns with an attention to some of the metaphors the Buddha employed, and showed, for example, that it is the five *khandha* which are normally on fire with greed, hatred and delusion, the *khandha* being the bundles of firewood which it was the daily duty of a brahmin student to collect in order to feed the three sacred fires. The normal translation of *khandha* as 'aggregates' tells us nothing. In the same book I argue that comparison with the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* enables us to say with some certainty that in the *Tevijja Sutta* the Buddha was preaching that kindness (*mettā*) by itself can enable one to attain nirvana; and I enlarge on this in my Gonda Memorial Lecture of 1997, published as *Kindness and Compassion as Means to Nirvana*.³⁶

However, the most remarkable discovery of this kind has been made by Professor Joanna Jurewicz of the University of Warsaw. The chain of dependent origination has to be understood on two levels, the general and the particular. At the general level, it embodies the Buddhist claim that nothing exists without a cause and that indeed there are no 'things' existing in total isolation from other 'things'; there are only causal

³³ 'Three souls, one or none: the vagaries of a Pali pericope', *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 1987 (11), 73–78.

³⁴ 'The Buddha's Book of Genesis?', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 35 (1992), 159–78.

³⁵ London: Athlone Press, 1996 (2nd edn, London: Routledge, 2006).

³⁶ Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Amsterdam, 1998.

processes. Over the centuries Buddhists came to regard the Buddha's teaching as 'the middle way' in this sense: that he proclaimed neither the existence of things in their own right, which we would now call essentialism, nor some kind of nihilism, but that the world of our experience is a world of flux and process. On the other hand, the particular interpretation of the chain of dependent origination has been contested among Buddhists from the earliest days: there is simply no agreement on the matter. In her article 'Playing with Fire: The *pratītyasamutpāda* from the Perspective of Vedic Thought',³⁷ Professor Jurewicz has demonstrated that the Buddha chose to express himself in these terms because he was responding to Vedic cosmogony as represented particularly in the famous 'Hymn of Creation', *R̥g Veda* x, 129, and in the first chapter of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, but also in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and other Upaniṣads. Given the centrality to Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, I think this may rank as one of the most important discoveries ever made in Buddhology.

Since I am on the point of retiring I suppose this could be regarded as a kind of swansong. I am proud to have played a part in helping to disinter some of the Buddha's meanings, a process which is already being carried forward by my pupils such as Alex Wynne and will no doubt continue. Perhaps perversely, I am also proud that I am still being attacked now and again for my lack of methodology. Just as in some cases theology can act as a kind of surrogate for faith, methodology, in my view, is a blind for having nothing to say. Methodology means 'How do you do it?' Once one realises this simple fact, it becomes obvious that to elevate this straightforward question, necessary at the outset of any enterprise whatsoever, into an alleged academic field is sheer hocus pocus. At least Buddhist studies in Britain have achieved one thing: they have been sincerely interested in Buddhism, and generally avoided fatuous verbiage.

RICHARD GOMBRICH

Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies

³⁷ *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, 2000 (26), 77–103