TRIBUTE TO DAVID SEYFORT RUEGG (1931–2021)*
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There are thousands of ways of remembering those who have left the manifested world. Biographic data are marking time and delineating space from where the portrait emerges. David Seyfort Ruegg devoted his entire life to the study of Buddhism and, in recalling his personality,


a passage from Thomas Merton’s pregnant text, written in memory of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, came to our mind. In alluding to Suzuki’s “capacity to apprehend and to occupy the precise standpoints where communication could hope – and we underline ‘could hope’ – to be effective” Merton adds –

He was able to do this all the more effectively because one felt he was entirely free from the dictate of partisan thought-pattern and academic ritualism. He was not compelled to play the complex games by which one jockeys for advantage in the intellectual world. Therefore, of course, he found himself quite naturally and without difficulty in a position of prominence. He spoke with authority, the authority of a simple, clear-sighted man who was aware of human limits and not inclined to improve on them with huge artificial structures that had no real significance. He did not need to put another head on his own, as the Zen saying goes. This of course is an advantage in any dialogue, for when men try to communicate with each other, it is good for them to speak with distinct personal voices, not to blur their identities by speaking through several official masks at the same time (Merton 1967: 3–4).

David Seyfort Ruegg who was born in New York on the first of August 1931, passed away in London on the second day of February 2021. Jan Westerhoff (2022), with eloquence and fine sense of humour, evokes the life and work of his master, and tells among other the beginning of David Seyfort Ruegg’s interest in Tibet and India. In his first year of academic studies spent in London (1948–1949) he followed the teachings of John Brough and Arthur Llewellyn Basham who after world war II became Lecturer of history at SOAS. With Brough and Basham the field of Indology and Buddhist studies entered David Seyfort Ruegg’s life, from the philological and the historical perspective. Possibly also, John Brough contributed to draw the attention of David Seyfort Ruegg to the problematic related to the brahminic system of gotras, that will emerge in his La théorie du Tathāgatagarbha et du Gotra (Seyfort Ruegg 1969), but also to the specificity of Buddhist Sanskrit. With Brough, David Seyfort Ruegg might have become aware of the fictitious limits imposed by unilateral visions, Brough’s first interests indeed move from Malayalam grammar, to Nepalese Buddhist rituals, to the parallel existing between the legends of Khotan and Nepal.¹

After the passing away of his father in 1950, together with his mother Aimée Seyfort, a painter of rare artistic sensibility, David Seyfort Ruegg moved to Paris where an impressive number of scholars teaching on India, Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, South-east Asia, Indonesia, Central Asia or China formed an attractive center where students from all parts of the world were gathering. The list of “Maîtres” – Renou, Filliozat, Pelliot, Demiéville, Mus, Lalou, Stein – and students – among them future prominent scholars, such as Jan W. de Jong, Alexander W. Macdonald, Madeleine Biardeau, Denis Sinor, Rahula Walpola, or Ojihara Yutaka, Paris offered a cradle of effervescent and fruitful exchanges.

The first book and the first article of David Seyfort Ruegg were written in French. The book – Contributions à l'histoire de la philosophie linguistique indienne, 1959 – appeared while David Seyfort Ruegg was already in India. In this treatise he published eight studies written in 1956. In its “Préface” the reader is introduced to David Seyfort Ruegg’s style of approaching a problematic, that will be the hallmark of all his future research. The chapter on Bhartṛhari’s Vākyapadīya begins with a short author’s mise en contexte. As he notes, the floruit of Bhartṛhari was spent in Ujjainī in the seventh century CE, and Yijing, who visited India at this epoch, tells that Bhartṛhari passed away in 651 CE. Thus, adds David Seyfort Ruegg, Bhartṛhari would then have been a contemporaneous, not only of Jayāditya and Vāmana, the authors of the Kāśikā, but also of Gauḍapāda, the paramaguru of Śaṃkarācārya, and probably also of Dharmakīrti, and belongs to an epoch among the most remarkable and productive of the history of India (Seyfort Ruegg 1959: 57).

David Seyfort Ruegg’s deep inquiry into the philosophy of linguistics will eventually resurface on various occasions, namely while questioning the possible “connection between the Madhyamaka theory of śūnyatā developed by Nāgārjuna and the mathematical zero” (Seyfort Ruegg 1978). This article is of a high and sophisticated intellectual and cultural dimension, in which David Seyfort Ruegg leads the analysis throughout a large spectrum of sources, including the contributions of Western scholars that, at his epoch, were increasingly interested in analytical philosophy and linguistics. He confronted and contrasted their position with the principles of the Indian philosophy of language, the Buddhist scholastic tenets, and the treatises on mathematics and astronomy that could, theoretically, have been accessible in India in the early centuries CE.
It is a fact admitted by himself that David Seyfort Ruegg’s work needs a concentrated and continuous attention from the part of his reader. When we first met him as a doctoral student, we told him that we did read his *Traité* several times, as we did with the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu and its commentary by Yaśomitra. He smiled, and this was not the sole aspect of his maieutics! David Seyfort Ruegg had also the gift of “responding to question with questions” and, by doing so, to indirectly make his interlocutor aware that the inquiry never ends – or, in the words of Eric Sackheim,

A question may be the answer
To another,
Asked, perhaps long ago,
By someone else.

The benefit of teachers and students speaking to each other in presence – as this may be done on the occasion of a scholar’s gathering, like the IABS Conference convened this year in Seoul, is essential. As said in a previous contribution, technology is not “evil *per se*” it is its use and abuse that causes in its user the opacity of the vision of an artificially created reality. Eloquent remains in this respect, the apologue introduced by Candrakīrti (seventh century CE) in his comment on the first stanza of the eighteenth chapter of the *Prasannapadāmadhyamakavṛtti*, the *Ātmaparīkṣā* or the examination [of the conditions in which] the self [and what the self appropriates, are fictionally constructed]. This famous apologue illustrates with a remarkable acuity the physical conditions under which the optical phenomenon of refraction gives rise to a mirage (*marīci*), one of the *upamānas* listed, among others, in the *Dhammapada* and to which the *Prajñāpāramitās* and other *Mahāyāna sūtras* refer frequently to illustrate the various modalities of erroneous apprehension of the *śūnyadharma* s. A few descriptive elements of the apologue cited by Candrakīrti, appear in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (T. xxv, 1509, k. 6, p. 102b), however the description given by Candrakīrti is to our knowledge unique and amazingly close to the scientific description of the optical phenomenon as it is known today.² It equally evokes the image

² Jong 1949: 7–8, 91. The French translation of this apologue is worth mentioning (the passages in *italic* underline the parallel with the description of the optical phenomenon):
of the mirage that Werner Herzog ("Fata Morgana," 1971) did experience and photograph while traversing the Sahara desert, in the late sixties. Today, the increasing "captation" of mind induced by the material use of "mediator tools" deviating the natural and creative approach to the subject matter, is leading the inquiry to a ready-made high-way of automatic research, itself grounded on specific algorithms whose function is merely quantitative and, of course, mercantile. While, as the Mādhyamikas so often teach, when a genuine relation human to human exists, as for example between teacher and pupil (guru and śiṣya), the conversants tirelessly introduce and are introduced step by step to the meaning (artha) which is profound and difficult to understand (gambhīra). For, there is no in-depth acquisition of knowledge – to be distinguished from unargumented information – without a patient and slow reading, the definition of philology by Roman Jackobson recently reexamined by Sheldon Pollock.

Ultimately this philological way of making sense is meant to encourage us to think of knowledge both as "a mental state that enjoys a closer relation to reality than does opinion" and as the achievement of consensus, whereby the goal of inquiry becomes finding, not just the truth, but also "agreement among human beings about what to do" (Rorty). And philology itself thereby becomes not just a way of being an academic, but a way of being a human. It offers a reorientation toward life (Pollock 2016: 922 and n. 21).

When David Seyfort Ruegg reached Paris in the very early fifties, Étienne Lamotte was visiting professor at the Collège de France, invited by Paul Demiéville. Lamotte and La Vallée Poussin were often introduced in David’s conversation, and Lamotte inspired his seminal article destined to the Workshop “Investigating Early Mahāyāna” organized by Gregory Schopen during his short stay at Stanford. Today, after more than twenty

“En été, à la fin de l’après-midi, quand l’astre aux rayons brûlants est sur le point d’entrer dans cette partie du firmament qui est sans nuage, il lance des rayons comparables à ces longues étincelles produites par un feu violent déviant quelque peu, et échauffant la terre, desséchée. En conséquence à proximité de cette terre desséchée, et en raison d’une vision erronée, se produisent des mirages qui ont l’aspect de l’eau; chez les gens qui se trouvent à distance ils produisent l’idée d’une eau limpide et azurée, mais, chez ceux qui sont près, ils ne la produisent pas.” Sanskrit: Prasannapadā, ed. La Vallée Poussin 1903–1913: 346.9–347.3.
years, few are those – though they exist – who continue to believe that Mahāyāna is some sort of independent current of thought – how extraordinary (āścarya, ūno mtshar che ba) would Candrakīrti say!

The beginning of David Seyfort Ruegg’s article indicates immediately the filiation and evokes the fact that Lamotte “once envisaged writing a second volume of his History of Buddhism, devoted to the Indian Mahāyāna. This second part was, however, never to appear.” Lamotte had explored quite a number of issues related to this topic that with his concern of taking a subject from the beginning to the end, in all its aspects, and in pursuing the translation of the Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa historically and critically contextualized, Lamotte hardly could write again on that mass of information. David Seyfort Ruegg’s article appeared in the JIABS (2004) with the title “Aspects of the Study of the Earlier Indian Mahāyāna,” which may be and certainly is a precious introduction for the students as well as a standpoint for the teacher to expand the questioning on the subject.

As Jan Westerhoff reports, David Seyfort Ruegg, met the Tibetan world in his young years in New York, and later during his séjours in India and the Himalayas where he could study with Tibetan high teachers and Indian scholars. He soon became aware of the importance of the historical and cultural phenomenon of transmission of Indian Buddhism to Tibet. The early fifties were also the years that saw the publication of Paul Demiéville’s Le Concile de Lhasa (1952). In 1937 Demiéville introduced to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris a series of Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang, which seem to confirm the historicity of the Buddhist controversy held in Tibet, between monks from India and from China. Demiéville made a careful analysis of the Indian and Chinese texts of the Yogācāra schools, that he confronted with the finding of Chinese historical material and the Tibetan Chinese manuscripts from Dunhuang. Unequalled so far, Le Concile de Lhasa is a mine of information, but rarely read in its entirety, particularly nowadays that the search, if not the knowledge “clic to clic” is prevailing. Demiéville’s translation of the Yogācārabhūmi of Saṃgharakṣa, draws attention to the importance of the text to understand the controversy between Chinese Masters, controversy whose central topic was the question of the ninth vijñāna, the amala, that Paramārtha (Demiéville 1952: 56, note)
supposedly introduced to the Chinese scholars – the question is debated. To enter here the subject would lead us far away. Interestingly though, the issues raised by Demiéville were taken over by David Seyfort Ruegg, in his magisterial *Buddha-nature, Mind and the Problem of Gradualism in a Comparative Perspective* (1989), a work that became an indispensable complement to Demiéville’s *Concile de Lhasa*. In his work (1989, 150–151) – which is the result of the Jordan lectures, delivered at SOAS – David Seyfort Ruegg refers to a mahāyānistic *addendum* to the *Yogācārabhūmi* of Saṃgharakṣa (second century CE?), appearing in the Chinese version (T. 606) translated by Dharmarakṣa (third/beginning of the fourth century CE), and that Demiéville critically studied in his *La Yogācārabhūmi de Saṃgharakṣa* (*BEFEO* T. 44 (2), 1951, 339–436, cf. 351–363, §3). Besides questioning the possible origin of this supplement Demiéville, as noticed by David Seyfort Ruegg,

pointed out the relevance of the section of this Supplement on the Bodhisattva practice to the history of Dhyāna in India and Serindia and to the question of ‘Subitism’ in China. Moreover, in connexion with the same Supplement, Demiéville has studied the procedure of leaping (Ch. ch’ao-hsing, *vyutkrāntaka-caryā*) by which the Bodhisattva is enabled to skip over several stages of the Path, the concept according to which the Bodhisattva achieves the stage of non-regression (*avaivartya*) in virtue of his first production of the *bodhicitta*, and the link between the technique of leaping and innate purity of mind (*prakṛtistha-prabhāvasvaratā* of *citta*) (Seyfort Ruegg 1989: 151 and notes).

These doctrinal discussions were current in China among Buddhist masters who, like the Sino-Tibetan scholar Facheng/Chos grub, toward the end of the eight–beginning of the ninth century CE, and in various degrees, were in close relation with the Tibetan court. Apropos this doctrinal problematic, which underlies the famous debate of bSams yas, David Seyfort Ruegg resumes the illuminating study of Lin Li-kouang (himself pupil and dear friend of Demiéville), adducing the Indian antecedents of this cluster of concepts.

In other words, questions concerning the immanent, immediate, spontaneous, and sudden were evidently already an issue in Kaśmīr and Serindia by the early fifth century. Indeed, differences between *tun* and *chien* approaches have been noticed in the preface to Taishō 618 ascribed to Hui-yüan (334–416) (Seyfort Ruegg 1989, 152, n. 304).
We are here at the core of the large area in which Buddhists from various horizons and provenance (namely India, Tibet, Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan) were meeting their fellow religious and scholars, discussing matters, introducing new ideas, reciprocally exchanging: something that the present world is desperately short of.

In his *Studies in the History of Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka Thought* (2000, 2002b), David Seyfort Ruegg retakes the two threads of his major interests – the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism and its transmission to Tibet – and starts his *visite guidée* into the subject matter by recalling that after the Debate of bSam yas the Tibetan ruler “reportedly decreed that in Tibet the theory of Buddhism should henceforth always follow Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka.” These two volumes constitute an in depth inquiry into large parts of the scholastic issues that progressively contributed to form one of the major philosophical schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and its scholasticism that with the imposing figure of Tsoṅ kha pa became one amongst the leading philosophical systems.

David Seyfort Ruegg accompanied the IABS during several years as a scholar and as a President. Buddhist studies were at the core of his intimate thoughts, never tragic always positive – in spite of all. He cared about the future of the academic study, particularly because of the fact that technology introduced a simplification if not a massification, instead of a fruitful variety of different disciplines. He cared about the intensification of “political correctness” unquestioned and blindly largely adopted, whose major and sad if not dangerous consequence “nourish” so to speak the intensification of identitarianism – a problematic that has been finely analysed by Sheldon Pollock.

If we need to know a world from the point of view of who made it, like those who made the world of classical India, we also need other vantage

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3 See Seyfort Ruegg 2000: 2 and n. 2 quoting the sBa b˙ţed or the “Chronicle of bSam yas,” the Chos ’byuṅ me tog sniṅ po of Naṅ raṅ ṇi ma ’od zer, as well as other historiographic treatises. However, in the canonical version, the text introducing the sGra sbyor bam po gniṅ pa – but not in the oldest dated versions of the Imperial decree –, Nāgārjuna appears together with Vasubandhu as the two authorities to be followed by the translators, the representatives of the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna traditions, beside the authoritative and referential system in matter of grammar and lexicography, the Vyākaraṇa tradition, see Scherrer-Schaub 2002: 318 (Tibetan text).
points: one that sees human culture projected on as large a screen as possible of patterns and divergences; one where our own particular identities and local commitments do not, indeed cannot, come into play, a vantage point where a culture becomes not an object of pride, pity, or piety, but a methodologically neutral – and blessedly neutral – datapoint (Pollock 2016: 918).

David followed with great attention the world’s news every day, till the end of his terrestrial parcours, and he constantly associated the commitment to Buddhist studies with the concern for the future of the world.

The present and future of Buddhist studies are of course to be seen not only as the product of what happens in universities and learned societies but in correlation, at least in part, with the world situation, and also, it has to be added, with the trials and troubles through which so many Buddhist peoples and their Samghas have passed. In that great arc of Buddhist civilization stretching from Tibet and Sri Lanka in the west to Korea and Japan in the cast, few indeed have been the Buddhist peoples that have been spared prolonged and terrible calamities during this century. The events to which I am referring have inevitably had a deep impact on Buddhism – both on the Samgha and also on the Dharma as teaching (deśanadharma) in its temporal situation – in the areas concerned and thus, if only indirectly, on Buddhist studies (Seyfort Ruegg 2002a: 205).

Particularly appealing were the discussions dealing with philosophical issues in which his subtle maieutics didn’t leave space to unclarified terms or subjects, especially in the case of the production of translations.

Until such problems associated with philosophical terminology and concepts have been first recognized to exist and then adequately investigated, lexicography and translations, as well as interpretation, will rest on unsecured foundations, as will Buddhist studies in any full sense of this term.4

Possibly his most precious legacy bequeathed to future scholars in the field of Buddhist studies consists in his constant invitation to thoroughly examine and question the subject matter in emic perspective, prior to produce ready-made interpretations, to widen the boundaries of the quest

for meaning or, more topically to reconsider the “often facile opposition relativism vs. universalism” that

all too often failed to take due account of the fact that what is relative in so far as it is conditioned in its linguistic or cultural expression may, nonetheless, in the final analysis have a very genuine claim to universality in terms of the human, and hence of the humanities (Seyfort Ruegg 2010: 226).

Elegant as a scholar, David Seyfort Ruegg – like Nāgārjuna – didn’t approve noxious practices, deriving from the opacity created by attachment to the self, such as duplicity, calumny, and other adharmic habits that with an extremely lucid understanding of the human nature he regretted to see nowadays becoming normal behaviour.

And yet, after a smile and in a pregnant manner, with his exquisite sense of humour, David moved to other subjects, inviting his interlocutor to share the mere pleasure of discussing and conversing: the pleasure of life!

References


5 See the Ratnāvalī, fifth chapter, on the “Bodhisattva practice (byaṅ chub sems dpa’i spyod pa),” or the apotheosis of Nāgārjuna address to his king, in particular the verses 6–12, listing and commenting the seventh sorts of māna, self-conceit/arrogance/pride, known in scholastic treatises such as the Dharmasamgraha or the Dharmasamuccaya (see Dietz 1980: 191).


