Who I am, and how I came to study Buddhism.

I begin with a brief historical account of my early life, because I agree with the Buddha’s analysis that we are a bundle of processes, and every moment are remaking ourselves, using the materials inherited from our past.

My father, Ernst Gombrich, was born in Vienna in 1909 and educated there. My mother, Ilse née Heller, was a classical pianist. My parents moved to England in 1935-6. I am their only son, born in London in 1937. Neither of my parents came from an academic family.

My father was widely known as an art historian, but his interest in history was far wider than the fine arts, and in his passport he described himself simply as a historian. Much of his academic life was based at the Warburg Institute. This was a library founded in Hamburg for the study of how down the centuries the ancient world (primarily Greece and Rome) has in all sorts of ways permeated our Western culture. The founder, Aby Warburg, was a member of the rich Warburg banking family. Because he was Jewish, it was decided to move his library to London, where it became the Warburg Institute, a part of the University of London. My father joined it as a very junior research fellow, held several positions there, and retired as its Director in 1972. While still a student in Vienna he published (in German) “A little history of the world for young readers”; its English translation is still in print.

I was deeply influenced by my father’s dedication to cultural history. His chief interest in my education was that I should learn Greek and Latin; so I ended up attending St. Paul’s School in London, which was founded in 1509 by John Colet, Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral and friend of the great humanist Erasmus, to educate boys “from all nacions and countres indifferently”. This appealed to my father, who detested all forms of nationalism. At St. Paul’s I specialised in classics, and won a scholarship in that subject to Magdalen College, Oxford.
After 18 months at Oxford, I felt that I had had more than enough of studying Latin and Greek, which in those days were still taught with a very narrow philological approach. As a university student, my father had studied some Chinese – and he always retained great enthusiasm for Chinese art and other facets of traditional Chinese culture. But, sensibly, I was put off the idea of switching to Chinese because in those Maoist days no foreigner could get a visa to study in China.

My best friend at school, Michael Coulson, had gone up to Oxford ahead of me; he had chosen to study Sanskrit and was enjoying it. Here was another great classical civilisation; my father had never studied it himself, but for me at the age of 22 that was an added attraction. So I followed in Michael’s footsteps. But these did not lead me directly to Buddhism. So how did I get there?

My father, an admirer of Voltaire, never in his life liked or admired any religion; but of course a cultural historian has to learn about that subject too. In his “little history of the world” he had a page on the Buddha -- rather well done, I think -- and though he had not taken his interest further, he considered the Buddha rather as a sage than as a promoter of irrationality. His library included a couple of volumes of German translation from the Pali Canon. I read a couple of books on Indian religion and was intrigued. In the year I left school, 1955, I read a new paperback by the American pragmatist philosopher E.A. Burtt, *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*. This book contains translated extracts from Buddhist scriptures, with comments by Burtt. I was much impressed.

In the same year, like most boys in my age group, I was drafted into the army for two years of “national service”. Luckily there was no war on. I was posted to Germany, ending up in Hanover. My father was friends with the director of the Hanover Art Gallery, Gert von der Osten. He and his family were kind to me and I spent much of my free time at weekends with them. During the war, Frau von der Osten had converted to Buddhism. She brought up her two children as Theravada Buddhists and held occasional meetings in her house; there were very few Buddhists in Germany at that time. I took part (my German was quite good) and also read a few pieces she gave me.

I would not say that I even came close to being converted, but I did become attracted by the Buddha’s ideas, particularly the ethics and psychology – as I have been ever since. I suppose that like my father I was content to study religion as an “outsider” and was interested in the religion’s origins and history, so that like him I
could, and do, call myself a historian. And from my father, and those around him, I understood that thorough and perceptive study of any culture requires intensive language study in the academic tradition with which I had been inculcated at school.

Back to Oxford, 1959 - 61. The syllabus for the BA in Sanskrit prescribed that one also study a “minor” language: the choice was between Pali, Prakrit, and Old Persian with Avestan. The minor language was studied for 2 hours a week during the six eight-week terms of the course. I chose Pali, though Oxford employed no one to teach it. Nominally that became the duty of the only Sanskrit teacher, Professor Burrow. He was a comparative philologist with no interest at all in the content of the texts he taught as samples of language. So I was self-taught, and have learnt from experience that that is a poor way to study a language. Maybe I flatter myself, but I used to imagine that had I been properly taught at Oxford I might have gone on to achieve much more.

Because of my upbringing, I grew up taking high standards in intellectual matters for granted, and was (and have remained) well aware of my deficiencies. I now realise that for many years I was rather naïve. Like many people, but with less excuse than most, I imagined that those high in the Oxford academic hierarchy were immensely learned. When I was appointed to the chair of Sanskrit at the early age of 39, I started confiding to those close to me that it hit me like a cold shower to find that a professor could be someone as incompetent as I was. As the years went by, I realised that unfortunately it was reasonable to extrapolate from my own case to the perception that many people of high academic rank were quite unimpressive. This was accentuated by my father’s remarking that the correlation between learning and intelligence was low and some people with a high reputation for learning, even a justified one, were quite stupid. I probably evolved rather slowly, but I ended up aware that I had better not accept received opinion about the intellectual stature of others and one had to investigate it for oneself; that though one should be honest about them, it was unwise to be too frank about one’s conclusions; that, alas, the correlation between academic success and true talent was poor – probably the world over, and holding a high position was largely a matter of luck – whereas on the positive side one could and should respect intelligence and intellectual rigour wherever one found it.

Not only did Oxford not provide teaching in Pali: Buddhism did not feature on any syllabus. It might have been taught to students of Chinese or Japanese, but it wasn’t, and in those days Korean and Tibetan were not yet available courses. It was possible
to take a single paper on Buddhism in the final examination in Theology, but extremely few people did. To set me a paper in my own final examination, the University had to invite an “assessor”, Dr. Edward Conze, a learned but eccentric Anglo-German scholar. Apparently no one thought it worthwhile to tell Dr. Conze what aspects of Buddhism I had studied, with the result that when I picked up the question paper I had a nasty surprise, because of the dozen or so questions, there was only one on a topic that I had even heard of. So I sat and wrote an answer to that one question for the entire three hours of the examination – and was no less surprised when I learnt that it had been given a first class mark.

I had a few wonderful teachers at school, and I greatly enjoyed and benefited from my years at Oxford, especially from my fellow students and the libraries, but I consider that the formal side of my Oxford education was appalling, and this opinion has led to the way in which my recent life has been involved with Pali. I was President and Treasurer of the Pali Text Society 1994-2002, and Co-Editor of its Journal 1996-2002, but this did not give me much scope for reform or innovation. When I took retirement, mandatory on becoming 67, from my Oxford Chair in 2004, the situation at Oxford for learning either Pali or Buddhism was almost the same as when I was an undergraduate in 1959-61: my post had been in Sanskrit, so there was no requirement for my successor to know or teach either of those two subjects. More by luck than judgment, I managed to exploit Japanese generosity and persuade the Numata Foundation (Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai) to endow a chair in Buddhist studies at Balliol College; but this still did nothing for Pali.

I therefore founded the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies (www.ocbs.org). I paid for it, because I did not know anyone else who would, except for my wife Sanjukta, who has always given me full backing in this, as in all else. I used the OCBS as a vehicle for Buddhist studies in general but particularly for teaching Pali. I had hoped that in my retirement I would read a great deal more and in particular do more research, but that was poor judgment: the OCBS has taken not only my slender financial resources but the lion’s share of my most important resource, time. My colleagues decided that the OCBS should have its own journal, and I found myself maneuvered into editing it. Academically I think this has proved its worth, but it does involve a lot of routine labour.

My Teaching.

I was particularly concerned to do something for Pali studies, and it turned out that
that meant teaching Pali outside the University. Experience of my pupils had taught me that a course of less than a hundred hours spread out over more than two years was an absurdly inefficient way of imparting a language; moreover, that the tradition (inherited from the pedagogy for Greek and Latin) of learning a classical language by translating into it from English literature was a waste of time, since surely what motivated people to study Pali was wanting to find out what the texts said. I was also dissatisfied with the available language primers, which I found inaccurate and unintelligently composed. So I wrote my own primer, and devised an introductory course which aims only to enable pupils to read Pali texts after three weeks of intensive study. At the time of writing (2018) I have given this course or very similar ones about two dozen times to pupils from all over the world, and I believe that only a couple of students have not achieved the aim of the course. Though my favourite way of teaching the course is the traditional one of interacting with pupils who are present in front of me, I have also learnt to deliver the course live over the internet with two assistant teachers.

In giving the course, I use it to put into practice my theories about teaching and education. In my first address to the students, I half seriously “confess” to them that I have enticed them with a promise to teach them Pali, which is a promise I intend to keep, but I also am motivated by the hope of indoctrinating them with my ideas about learning and education.

I say that the only reason for coming on the course which I regard as valid is the wish to learn Pali. This aim is not furthered by passing an exam or leaving with a certificate. Competition is pointless or worse. Knowing Pali is an individual matter, and learning it better or faster than one’s fellow pupils is irrelevant, and has no bearing on how well one has succeeded. Some people simply learn more quickly than others, and that counts for nothing. Besides, how one learns Pali is also of no relevance. Some people prefer to use sources, such as books or the internet, which give you answers so that you do not have to work them out for yourself, and there is nothing wrong with using such external aids (“cribs”) if you do so sensibly, in such a way that you will be able to find the answers for yourself when such aids are not available. In fact, I constantly encourage my students to look everything up, even if they think they already know it, and particularly to use the dictionary in this way. I tell them of my senior Greek master at school, a man who knew Greek extremely well and was a spectacularly successful teacher. He would sit with the Greek lexicon on his lap, and when asked a question used to say, “Let’s look it up!” and proceed to do so, encouraging us to do the same. He gave the impression of being almost
ludicrously lazy, and probably that was not quite untrue, but he was as good as any schoolmaster in the country at coaching his pupils to win university entrance scholarships in classics.

One of the best, or sometimes the best way of learning is from your fellow pupils. In fact, so far from learning by competing, the best method is likely to be the opposite: to learn by co-operating. For this reason I like to set my pupils to learning their Pali by working in small groups. When they begin to work together, such a group will soon find that some of them are quicker or more able in some other way than others – typically, this will be because they have prior experience of similar work, such as learning Sanskrit. If personalities allow, the group can operate in such a way that the faster learners help to teach the slower learners. This is likely to benefit everybody: the slower learners have the advantage of having a teacher at hand, whom they can ask questions as they go along, while teaching is the best possible way of hammering in one’s knowledge, fixing it in one’s own mind and at the same time making sure of details. When I read texts with students in class, I found over many years that I learnt more about our subject matter even when I had read the same text many times before. Sometimes my own understanding was corrected, and even when it was not, the students’ questions often made me think and alerted me to points that had not previously occurred to me. It did not take me very long to discover that the main benefit of studying at Oxford was that one could constantly learn from the brilliance not of one’s teachers but of one’s fellow students; and if I was sensible I would myself regard my teaching as above all an opportunity to learn.

I do not allow my pupils to interpret my teaching as a revelation that there is nothing wrong with laziness. Quite the contrary! I repeat to them ad nauseam that hard work is a sine qua non. As I say, how they work I leave largely to individual taste. But I tell them that for their learning of Pali, or anything else they might study, there is but one solid and essential foundation: intellectual honesty. They must never relax their vigilance in asking themselves: Have I really understood this? In working on a text, they have to know not just how to translate it, but also why that is the best solution. When they look up a word in the dictionary, they will usually be offered a range of possible meanings, and have to judge which one would fit the context best, and why. Furthermore, that does not mean that there is only one correct answer: they should take all possibilities into consideration, and the truth is often not equivocal. When they learn something, from me or from any other source, they have to be sure that they do not merely understand it well enough to get by, but whether they understood it well enough to argue for (or against) it. The light of self-
criticism must never be allowed to flicker – let alone, to go out.

If one follows this path, the only one which I regard as ultimately permissible, one’s conclusion will very often be “I don’t know” or “I cannot be sure”. That is often the best and most honest answer. But it is often not enough, because one should then add, if circumstances permit, exactly why and what one does not know or cannot be sure of.

I do not usually take my pupils further than this in my introductory discourse; but it rarely takes many lessons before I go on to explain to them the nature of human knowledge, and in particular how this applies to any historical study, including that of Buddhism. Any statement we can make about the past depends on evidence, and may be wrong because the evidence may be faulty or inadequate in any number of ways – or simply misunderstood. In fact this applies to any empirical statement, but we need only deal here with statements about the past. If I say that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1856, I may have misremembered or misread the book; there is a broad consensus that the correct date is 1865, and there is so much agreement because it was so public an act which impinged on millions of lives. But if I say that Babasaheb Ambedkar was murdered in 1956, while the date is generally agreed, the circumstances of his death (“in his sleep”) are still mysterious, and it would be reasonable to say that the cause of his death is not known. Such considerations apply to facts about very many people – one might say, almost everyone -- who lived long ago.

It is Karl Popper who has demonstrated that the best solution in such cases is to look for the best available hypothesis.

Knowledge advances by making conjectures and then testing them against the evidence. It does not matter whether you call the conjectures hypotheses, theses, theories, or simply guesses, the principle is the same. The origin of a conjecture has absolutely no bearing on its value. Some people fancy that you should form your conjecture only after assessing all relevant evidence, but Popper, following David Hume, has shown that this is ultimately wrong, because this principle of induction, as it is called, cannot yield foolproof results. You can never know that you have access to all relevant evidence. You may think, on the basis of seeing thousands of swans, that all swans are white, but then you find black swans in Australia. Or you may think, on the basis of your experience every day of your life, that the sun rises every morning, but then you travel to the Arctic Circle.
What has happened is that on the basis of any number of examples you have built a hypothesis, but a single example is then enough to refute it. This is not to deny that a refutation may itself be refuted, for instance, by discovering that what was believed to be a black swan is in fact no swan at all.

Some scholars in the humanities have drawn a wrong deduction from this. They gather a body of data, for example, about Sanskrit texts, but are then unwilling to extrapolate, which they tend to call “going beyond the facts”. On the one hand, even the apparently well-established data themselves depend on theories -- such as that the texts are not modern forgeries; on the other hand, extrapolation is but another term for a theory which attempts to make a deduction from available evidence, and is thus necessary if knowledge and understanding are to advance.

People seem unwilling or unable to take in that there is a basic asymmetry here. What people think of as ‘facts’ or ‘data’ are themselves theories. The weight of evidence, as it accumulates, may make them more and more probable, but their certainty can never be finally established. Take the matter of translation. Let us leave aside the problem that, since hardly any words have a perfect equivalent in another language, there are very few examples of possible perfect translations; let us stick to what an examiner, for example, considers a candidate to have translated correctly or incorrectly. There is a literally infinite number of possible incorrect translations of a sentence, and a very few which have a high probability of being correct. In many cases, when dealing with Sanskrit or Pali, there may seem to be two possibly correct translations, or even more, and which to use becomes a matter of judgement, or indeed of indifference. But the very idea that there exists one correct translation, if one could only find it, and its correctitude will endure forever, is fallacious.

Rather than be unwilling to make bold guesses, we should simply understand that in an empirical subject, be it philology, history or physics, there is no final certitude: all knowledge is provisional. But this is not relativism. It is evident that knowledge does advance: for this modern medicine and technology stand as sufficient proof. If you try to build a computer or a rocket on the basis of nineteenth century physics, you will get nowhere. So the fact that our theories may always turn out to be wrong should not at all depress us, but on the contrary make us realize how exciting intellectual work can be.
Depending on how you choose to look at it, it can be humbling or encouraging to reflect how “knowledge” of our field changes. When I was young, historians generally assumed that the early Buddhist texts were composed by being written down; that was assumed, for example, by Romila Thapar in her Pelican *History of India* (1965). After Thapar had published her book, most scholars of ancient India came to the view that during the Buddha’s lifetime there was no writing in the Indian society around him, so that all the texts ascribed to him must have been composed and initially transmitted orally. On this view, it came to be considered extremely improbable that what we now read in those texts corresponds with any precision to what the Buddha himself said, and most scholars assumed that to date those texts was thus impossible. Indeed, they held that the best available hypothesis was that those texts must somehow have evolved during the period of roughly four centuries between the Buddha’s death and the writing down of the Pali Canon in Sri Lanka. By what mechanism the texts were composed and preserved they have not said. The origin of the language in which the Canon is composed is likewise deemed mysterious, or even unknowable; but scholars have generally agreed that the Pali version is just one among several (or many) which must have existed in different dialects as they were orally transmitted in different parts of India.

Only recently, when commissioned to write a small book about Pali, did I turn my mind to what could be the best available hypothesis about the origin of these texts. The Canon itself has an account of this, and that account is believed by most or all Theravada Buddhists, but scholars have refused to take it seriously. In my book I have now argued that by and large what the texts say about themselves is indeed the best available hypothesis. I have thus been able to argue that it is plausible, to say the least, that Pali is more or less what the Buddha himself spoke, and that the bulk of the Canon should indeed be ascribed to him. I hope that my argument will be studied and taken seriously, and that this will make many more people eager to read in the Canon what the Buddha had to say.

In the course of my academic career I had to supervise no less than 50 theses for higher degrees, which at Oxford are the D.Phil. and the M.Phil. So it is not surprising that I often found myself being consulted on how to write a thesis. At a certain point, now many years ago, I wrote the following. The only point at which I have had to make a change is that in the original version I referred to the examiners as male – because they invariably were. It is pleasant that in this respect my advice has become out of date. I reproduce the piece here, because some have found it
useful and I cannot remember anyone finding fault with it. I should perhaps add, however, that it is written with British universities in mind, and it may be that American universities would have further requirements.

Advice on how to write a thesis.

The best way to write a thesis is to pretend that you are not writing a thesis. Pretend that you are writing a book. One hopes in any case that the thesis will in due course be published as a book; this policy will minimise the need for revision. But there are even more important reasons for writing a book, not a thesis. We have all read books and have an idea what a good book is like. We have read few or no theses; they are mysterious, and therefore frightening: one wonders whether the "examiners" will approve. Of course, one has no idea who those examiners will be; but in the abstract one projects on to them various divine attributes, notably omniscience. Writing for the eyes of an omniscient being cannot but present intellectual and emotional problems!

So write a book. The first requirement is to decide on your target audience. Normally that should not be difficult. The audience will lie between two extremes. Those who are not interested in your subject will never open the book; they can be ignored. Now imagine that you have been invited by a club to talk on your subject. You will not know most of the members of the audience (who, I repeat, are there voluntarily and may thus be assumed to have some interest in the subject). You can be sure that prior knowledge of the subject will vary from member to member. A few may be "experts", but you do not know whether even those experts have read the same books as you have, and their views may be what you would regard as idiosyncratic. On the other hand, it is virtually certain that some of the audience are new to the subject, having only just joined the club. In brief, you can be sure of virtually NO shared knowledge; you can take nothing for granted but the most general cultural background.

In this situation – which you are likely to face many times in your life – the trick is to convey clearly and succinctly the background information (names, dates, first principles) which the audience will need in order to follow the more specialised material, what you really want to say. You must be sure that the audience understands what for you have become your presuppositions. And as you proceed you must always observe from the corner of your eye not the old fogey snoring in the
front row but the shy newcomer in the back, who wants to know but needs to be told.

What this means, I suggest, is that one is writing for the intelligent teenager, the high school pupil who is open to new knowledge and ideas but has little or no information. The ideal may be to keep in mind a specific individual, a younger brother or sister or cousin perhaps, and write for them. This can be carried further: work on a thesis will flow forwards if one imagines oneself as writing a daily letter to such a person. (One might even actually do this; it is just that I have yet to come across such a case and so put my ideal to the test.) Then put yourself in the shoes of the recipient and think what you need in order to understand and enjoy those letters.

The first requirement is that you begin at the beginning. The reader needs to know what the problem is in order to understand why the information provided is likely to be relevant. If one is given information without being told why one needs it, one soon gets bored and also forgets the information. So provide all essential facts, but never without an explanation of why they are essential – essential to what.

The recipient does not need to be told in the first letter what will be in the fiftieth, or the last. Probably you do not know yourself. But she does need to know what you are trying to do, what you are looking for. You have to make her keen to read the next letter.

No one is going to make you publish those letters just as you wrote them. At the end, you revise them for publication. To a greater or lesser extent, the problem will have taken an unexpected course, so you take out the information which proved to be unnecessary and put in the things which turned out to be relevant but you did not then think to include. But this does not allow you to lose sight of the fact that a book is read from the front to the back, and so that is how you must think it through.

Since you are writing for innocents, your first moral obligation is to tell them that you may be wrong. What this means in practice is that you must say what others have written on the subject, especially where you disagree with them. And of course it is equally obligatory to acknowledge what you consider good ideas. Remember that one can never lose credit by admitting indebtedness, only by failing to do so. So in your first chapter you must write something about previous work in the field. It may well be inappropriate to go into detail at that point, but something must be said,
to orientate your reader and give her a chance to look elsewhere for background information and for alternative views.

Writing clearly is not an optional extra. It is essential. Unless you write clearly, you are unlikely to be read, let alone understood. It is true, alas, says that some people are most impressed by what they cannot understand, but we are not writing for them. Above all, writing clearly is good for you, the author, because you cannot write clearly unless you have first thought clearly.

One aspect of writing clearly connects with what I have already said about sequentiality - as in the letters. One reads forward, one thing at a time. Therefore everything necessary to the argument must be in the main text, not in the footnotes. I would go further and say that everything you really want to be read must be in the main text. Footnotes are just for the record, to show that you are aware of things - like references. Mine is a stern doctrine and not easy to follow. Digressions are tempting. I would say that if they are worthwhile they belong in the main text. There they can and should be signalled as digressions: “I shall now explore the side-issue of Q, and return to the main argument concerning P on p.000 below.” Where the potential footnote is needed to supply a lot of supplementary information, the solution is usually to supply an appendix (the existence of which can be signalled in the text). One can over-generalise, but by and large the paucity of footnotes can be a good index of clarity.

One sort of digression to which an appendix may be suited is the consideration of views with which you disagree. To show why Prof. X in his learned monograph is out to lunch may impede the clear flow of your own narrative, and is likely to interest only a few specialists. Here for once is a difference between a thesis and a book: the examiners, who are supposed to assess your general knowledge of a field, may well want to know what you think of Prof. X. Tell them in a detachable portion of your work which can be taken out before you send it to the publishers. You can always publish it in the obscurity of a learned journal if you don’t mind incurring the enmity of Prof. X.

I only really find out what I think by writing it down, and I believe that I am far from unique. This means that the only way to progress is to write - even if you have to rewrite again and again. Catch the post every day, six days a week!

Finally, let me return to where you are now, embarking on writing a thesis. I sense a
credibility gap: you do not really believe me when I say that you should be writing for your little sister. What about those learned examiners? Alas, you are young: you still believe that somewhere up there live those wise old men and women who really know it all, or at least are competent to judge it all. That, I am sorry to tell you, is a dream; and while reality is harsh, to acknowledge it is the only way to make any kind of success of your life. So what am I saying? I am not saying that your examiners will be foolish, ignorant, incompetent and biased; let us hope they will be none of those things. I am saying that if your thesis is any good at all – and the supervisor should not let it be submitted otherwise – it will contain something new and cover a fair range of ground, and with three or four years of full-time study just behind you, you will be at an immense advantage over the academic who has not had such a long spell of study since he was your age and nowadays rarely gets to read a whole book outside the summer vacation. You will be more clued in and up to date in your subject than the examiners. Moreover, the examiners will probably be appointed to complement each other: one because he knows one part of your field, the other because she knows another. Each will be quite ignorant about a lot of it. You have to interest both of them in the bits they know nothing about. If you are interesting, clear, and basically accurate – leave yourself enough time to proofread carefully before submitting -- you will succeed.

My Research.

I have been extremely lucky, not only in my parents. While I was still a boy, my father became great friends with Karl Popper. After spending the war (WWII) in New Zealand, Popper came to a post at the London School of Economics and settled in a house in the countryside just NW of London. He and my father had long telephone conversations at least once a week, and quite often we went out at the weekend to spend a Saturday or a Sunday with Karl and his wife Henni. Large parts of Karl’s work were well beyond the understanding of my father or myself, but in my late teens I began to read, understand and enjoy some of his work, including The Open Society and its Enemies. When I was an undergraduate Karl put together a volume of his papers called Conjectures and Refutations, and invited me to read it and offer criticisms and suggestions. I believe that in the end he accepted very few of my suggestions, and I can claim no credit whatever for what was finally published, but of course I benefited enormously from thinking about what he had written.

Though he had even less interest in Buddhism than did my father, my debt to Karl
Popper is enormous. Even the advice which I have passed on in the previous section, to write my thesis as if I were addressing it to an intelligent ten-year-old, comes from him. I shall now use other things I learnt from him to introduce other guidelines his work gave me for my own research.

Since a conjecture is usually an attempted refutation of a view previously held by oneself or others, his work soon convinced me that the history of ideas is more or less the narrative of a running dialogue. I have consistently applied this insight to my understanding of the relation of Buddhism to brahminism in general, and in particular to understanding a great deal of the Buddha’s teaching as a polemical response to brahminical ideas found in the early Upaniṣads. Almost all of my interpretation of the Buddha’s thought comes under this rubric. Of course, when one is arguing with current opinions, one usually also accepts some of what the other side is saying, and this is also true of the Buddha. To understand what is happening, one has to bear both agreement and disagreement in mind. For example, when the Buddha says he cannot see evidence for the existence of the ātman, one has to understand that what he means by that word is what the Upaniṣads meant – not, for instance, what a Christian may mean by “soul”. On the other hand, he takes the cycle of rebirth for granted, offering no argument to prove its existence, and this is because he is unquestioningly taking the idea over from the brahmins (and other thinkers of those times).

For 28 years I was Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford (a job, incidentally, for which I did not apply), and my primary duty was to teach Sanskrit. (I could legitimately teach Pali because there was no one else on the staff to do that.) Much that is original in my work comes from my acquaintance with brahminical texts to which the Buddha was responding. Earlier scholars who have written that the Buddha did not know those texts have been definitively proven wrong. A technique which the Buddha was fond of was taking key brahminical terms and infusing them with a new meaning; often the brahminical use of the terms was in ritual and metaphysics, for both of which the Buddha substituted ethics, making the terms refer to means to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

A famous Upaniṣad, the Brhadāraṇyaka, spells out how the fate of people at death depends on the degree of gnosis they have attained. Those who have realized that they are essentially a part of brahman, the essence of the universe, go to join brahma when they die. The Buddhist term brahma-vihāra means “living with Brahman”; it is an example of the Buddha’s giving new meaning to a brahminical
term. I have compared the relevant passage in the Upaniṣad with the Tevijja Sutta, the main text in which the Buddha teaches his own version of the brahma-vihāras. Once one follows the comparison it is I think impossible to deny that the Buddha is basing his text on the Upaniṣadic one, and playing his trick of pouring new wine into old bottles: he is preaching that to practise kindness, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity is to attain the divine state in this life, namely nirvana.

When one proposes an entirely new interpretation of a text, one should try also to explain why that interpretation has eluded previous readers. That my interpretation of the brahma-vihāras is not recorded in the Buddhist tradition is easy to explain: Buddhists simply did not study brahminical texts. Less seriously, I may add that it probably eluded other modern scholars of Pali and Buddhism because they did not have to teach the Upaniṣads.

Both Karl Popper and my father showed me the importance of working hard and valuing accuracy, but beside that I picked up that good ideas and relevant information may come from anywhere, and this means that one should give free rein to one’s curiosity and not be shy about exploring new fields and other disciplines. No one, I believe, ever had to spell out to me that if I was interested in Buddhism almost any discipline could turn out to be relevant to my problems. Throughout my teenage years in school I studied classics, and the way in which the subject was taught fell almost entirely within the discipline of philology. When I started reading for a degree at Oxford it was the same, except that the approach was even narrower. The systematic study of texts, almost as if through a microscope, rested on a solid centuries-old scholarly tradition, and the accuracy demanded stood me in good stead, but I was relieved in the end to escape to studies in which I could start thinking for myself.

After my four years as an undergraduate at Oxford, I had two years at Harvard. In some ways I continued there with what I had been learning before, applying philological skills to the study of Sanskrit, but the less constricted American system allowed me also to discover the social sciences. Though I did not take formal courses in them, I began to enjoy reading anthropology. I did more of this after returning to Oxford as a research student. In particular I had the good fortune to read, and then meet, Gananath Obeyesekere, the brilliant Sinhalese anthropologist; I was inspired both by his work and by his personality, and he has influenced me ever since our first meeting. Somewhat later, after I had already begun my own fieldwork in Sri Lanka, I came to know and admire the sociologist of religion Bryan Wilson, and I
regularly attended his weekly seminars at Oxford for several years.

Another principle inculcated by Karl Popper is that when one sets out to criticise a view proposed by someone else, one should always take care to present the opponent’s view in its strongest form. For instance, if it contains an ambiguity or some other kind of unclarity, it is essential to give it the benefit of the doubt and assume that what was meant was the best formulation. One must not assume that one’s opponent is an idiot or an ignoramus unless the evidence for that is compelling.

This is a matter of civilised behaviour as well as intellectual honesty. Few things in my academic life have upset me more than a report written by a well-known American Buddhologist who had been invited to examine an Oxford thesis which I had supervised. In his report he made a huge fuss over something he claimed that the candidate had written. When I first saw the criticism I was astonished and baffled: had the candidate really written something so absurd? I rushed to look at the thesis. I found that a sentence in it was capable of bearing two interpretations. One of them was perfectly sensible and unobjectionable, and for this reason it had never occurred to me that a second interpretation, which would have been ridiculous, was possible. The examiner, however, had been so malicious as to assume, without any evidence, that the interpretation intended by the candidate was the ridiculous one, and made this the basis for a devastating attack (to which the student was given no chance to respond).

Luckily I do not think that many scholars treat students as wickedly as this: most of us tend to be more benign and less inaccurate. Nevertheless, It seems to me that a more general form of not trying hard enough to give credit where it is due is widespread when scholars present other people’s views. Oddly enough, I would argue that probably no one in our field has suffered from this more than the Buddha himself. On the first page of the Preface to my book What the Buddha Thought, I wrote of the Buddha that “his thought has a greater coherence than is usually recognised.”

This claim can be regarded as a thesis which needs to be defended (and/or attacked) at length, preferably with many examples. I am not going to undertake that here. Instead, I shall take the opportunity not to discuss specific teachings of the Buddha, but to look at two general positions which I hold him to have taken which harmonise with his other positions, but which in my experience many of his modern followers
clearly do not take, and perhaps hardly even consider.

Though the word (or a Pali equivalent, if there is one) does not come into the discussion, I rarely if ever introduce the Buddha to an audience without explaining that he did not regard himself as a “philosopher”, and by this he meant that his only aim was to help people diminish their suffering, preferably to the point at which they would be freed from the cycle of rebirth. He intended to help people, and only attempted to teach the truth to the extent that it was helpful; further speculation he tended to discourage. This too I find utterly Popperian. Like Popper’s social philosophy, the Buddha’s approach is not to start from grand theories and ideals but to see what is going wrong and try to put it right. This corresponds to what Popper called “piecemeal social engineering”. Popper’s work has made me alive to these important facets of the Buddha’s thought.

At the same time one must remember that, as Paul Williams has written: “The teachings of the Buddha are held by the Buddhist tradition to work because they are factually true (not true because they work).” Let me look at two instances of such teachings.

Philosophers have recently expended much energy on asking what the Buddha thought about free will and how it can be reconciled with the law of karma and the doctrine of dependent origination. Is there inconsistency here? While I am well aware that I am not a philosopher myself and will not satisfy those who are, I would make two points in reply.

Firstly: because of his pragmatic intent the Buddha (unlike most philosophers) did not aim at what we would call mathematical accuracy, but only at engineering accuracy. I believe that the abhidharma, which codified the teachings and placed them in categories, tended to misinterpret the Buddha by attributing mathematical accuracy to his statements, when that was not his intention. For example, he taught that the laws of causation in the world show that things do not just happen at random, while on the other extreme determinism is false, otherwise there could not be the moral choice on which the law of karma depends. Free will, and hence moral responsibility, must lie somewhere between these two extremes, but it was pointless to try to define exactly where: pointless because it would not help anyone in their striving for enlightenment, but also because it was impossible anyway. He listed the workings of karma as one of the things that one should not worry about because it would only drive one crazy. Unlike the neurologists today who try to track morality
through our brains, the Buddha obviously understood that reality is far too complicated for us to unravel it.

Our cultural distance from the Buddha gives rise to a second misunderstanding. Over most of Asia people (who include adherents of several different religions) believe in some version of karma; but they rarely if ever ask how it relates to causality or free will. What they want is an answer to the question “Why is this happening to me?”, or such variants as “What is happening to my recently dead family member?” In other words, they want to know about the result of people’s actions, what in Sanskrit is called the *karma-phala*. They want to be told the connection between the present and the past; they *assume* that the present is the result of an act of free will, and simply accept that karma works as a particular kind of determinism, a result which one has no choice but to accept. In the canonical texts we find the Buddha telling his curious followers where recently dead members of their group have been reborn, and we even find him complaining how tedious it is to be questioned on that point.

It is helpful to remember that the theory of karma is based on an analogy with agriculture. One sows a seed, there is a time lag during which some invisible process takes place, and then the plant pops up and can be harvested. The result of an intentional act is normally referred to as its “fruit”. The nature of the harvest is more or less determined by the nature of the seed planted, but this cannot be predicted with great precision, for it also depends on various circumstances such as rainfall, and indeed sometimes it turns out that there is no harvest at all. It is within this intelligible framework, I believe, that the Buddha can tell his followers what they want to know about karma, and what it will help them to understand.

Similarly, his teachings on causation will greatly advance their ability to think systematically and rationally about how everything in the world and in our lives has causes and consequences, but “The Buddha has spoken of the cause and cessation of the *dhammas* [things] which arise from causes”, and the connected dictum “This being, that arises” give no specific information, and certainly are not a philosophical thesis capable of proof or refutation; they just point to a principle. Incidentally, I think it is confusing to equate this teaching with dependent origination (*paṭicca*-samuppāda), which is a much more specific and informative teaching about the cycle of rebirth.

Now let me give a rather different instance of how I think that the Buddha has been
widely misunderstood. It concerns meditation. To my mind there is still room for a good deal of disagreement about the meditative practices that the Buddha taught. Besides, I suspect that this might not have bothered him: he would have encouraged one to practise whatever one found worked. However, I have misgivings about the modern cult of meditation in the West, which is also spreading to Asia. I agree with the Buddha’s teaching that sound ethics are a prerequisite for success in meditation; and I believe he taught that sound ethics are based on unselfishness.

Meditation in the West today, as I see it, is tends to be an essentially solitary pursuit of happiness. Learning to meditate on an (often misconceived) idea that one has no self is a self-centered activity that I think likely to be self-defeating. Why not use the time to go and be kind and helpful to someone? I think it is relevant that traditionally meditation was always taught in a monastic setting, mostly to monastics; it was not an occasional interlude in a life engaged with the world.

In taking this critical view of meditation, I believe I am merely reformulating the Buddha’s Second Noble Truth, that the origin of suffering is craving or desire, which can also be expressed as self-centredness. It is thus inconsistent with the Buddha’s ethical stance. Even if I am quite wrong, this may give an idea what Buddhism means to me.

Coda.

What do I regret?

That after my student days I never had nearly enough time to read.

That I failed to spend enough time reading primary sources.

That the course of my life did not permit me to learn Chinese. I suspect that to do that really well you need to start early.

That, like almost all academics today, I had to waste so much time and energy on fulfilling the idiotic demands of professional institutions: form-filling, syllabuses, examining, writing references, fund-raising, etc etc.

I wish that computers had arrived earlier in my life so that, despite my lack of technical flair, I could have learnt better how to use them.
What did I do right?

I more or less began my study of Buddhism by spending time in a Buddhist country to get a feel for what it meant to traditional Buddhists.

I understood that religion does not equal doctrine: that religion is first and foremost a form of experience, which in some contexts can be compared to a life style, in other contexts to poetry/literature; that as an experience it has a historical dimension, and heavily overlaps with culture. There is always room for specialised work at a high level, but most interesting research into religion is interdisciplinary, because religious phenomena can be seen from so many angles.

I understood the need to learn the languages of the sources, whether oral or written, and the need to be punctiliously accurate in translation – which has nothing to do with pedantry. I understood at the same time that while there are always an infinite number of wrong translations, there is very rarely just one translation which is the right one. An important part of translating well is choosing language suited to your intended audience.

Though teaching for 40 years at one institution is inevitably repetitive, I did manage not to spend a great deal of time teaching subjects that bored me.

I was lucky enough to have great models before my eyes: first my father and Karl Popper, then, when I began research, Gananath Obeyesekere. Later I got to know the late Bryan Wilson and his work, and him too I admire immensely.

Of course I love and admire quite a few books which are not relevant to my academic career; the relevant ones that stand out are few. In addition to Obeyesekere and Bryan Wilson, they are (in chronological order):


Yu-Shuang Yao: *Taiwan’s Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism: Origins,*


The books by Carrithers and Gellner began as D.Phil. theses at Oxford, which I am proud to have supervised.

I am extremely grateful to many Buddhists who have indulged me and not taken offense at my questions.

Oxford

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