

Steve Collins — Valediction For A Friend

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Steve was a close personal friend both when we were graduate students at Oxford and from 1981–1987 as a colleague at the University of Bristol. He finally resigned his post at Bristol, I think in 1990, to pursue a highly successful academic career in the United States, and we in Bristol appointed Rupert Gethin to replace him. The rest, as they say, is history. Since then I have seen Steve very few times — perhaps no more than four or five — and we did not keep in touch.

I shall leave to others better qualified than I am to give an informed assessment of Steve's academic work in a range of areas including the study of Theravāda Buddhism, Pali, and the anthropology and sociology of religions. What follows will be a personal memory of him. That said, after so many years I cannot guarantee its accuracy. It is what I recall, what I seem to remember of those days so long ago among the spires, libraries and gardens of Oxford and Bristol when we were young and had long hair and high hopes and naturally the sun always shone.

Steve was very slightly younger than I was and I first knew him in the early 1970s when he was still an undergraduate. I had arrived at Oxford as a graduate student to undertake research work in Indian philosophy. I recollect that I came to know Steve because we had a mutual friend, Bruce, who was an excellent guitarist (of course!). Steve's father had died when Steve was quite young, as had my own mother when I was young, so perhaps that gave us some sort of subconscious commonality although I didn't realize it at the time.

When Steve graduated with a First Class Honours degree (a rather rarer achievement in British universities in those days) the idea arose that he might continue with graduate work and perhaps because of our friendship I persuaded him that given his intellectual background and interests in philosophy and psychology (not to mention the Classics) Buddhist thought could be a really exciting (in those heady days definitely cool) area to consider. I also introduced him to Richard Gombrich, at that time Lecturer in Sanskrit at Oxford and an extremely inspiring tutor and always enormously encouraging to students in general and graduate students in particular. Steve had a natural ability for Indo-European languages and he had no problem reaching a high standard in Sanskrit and Pali. He subsequently completed, under Richard Gombrich's supervision, an outstanding D.Phil. (the Oxford version

of the Ph.D.) on the Theravāda approach to *anattā*, a thesis that was eventually published by Cambridge University Press as *Selfless Persons*. It is still, I think, the most intellectually and philosophically sophisticated study of its subject, and it has had wide influence not least in philosophical circles and the discussions around the work of Derek Parfit. Steve told me that the rather clever title suddenly came to him as he was walking round the corner in Oxford from Magdalen Street into Broad Street. Whether the close proximity of Balliol College, or Blackwell's enormous bookshop, or the memorial near the spot where the Protestants Thomas Cranmer and others were burned, fired him with appropriate inspiration he did not say.

What can I say about Steve as a person in those days? Was he indeed a selfless person? He was extremely popular and fun, full of laughter with a lovely smile that I can see from much later pictures stayed with him. He was capable of enormous kindness and consideration. I remember rather later, when we were in Bristol, one weekend when my wife and family were away I managed to fall off my bike at speed and badly damaged my right hand. It was Steve who came to the rescue, taking me to hospital, staying with me as long as was necessary and looking after me (it needed sorting out under general anaesthetic!) until my family returned a day or so later.

And Steve had a rather droll sense of humour in a clever sort of way. For he was clever, and one had the impression that he knew he was clever. My recollection, at least of later experience of him, is that Steve could sometimes seem a bit dismissive of others and their opinions when he disagreed or thought they were being stupid. But I should add we were all a bit like that as graduate students at Oxford in those days. Perhaps it was just the arrogance of youth, or maybe the effect of the Oxford air (still pervaded with the vibrations of Tolkien — who died in 1973 while we were both at Oxford — C.S. Lewis and the *Inklings*) on young minds. Doubtless, though, it was also linked to the Oxbridge (i.e. Oxford and Cambridge) education system, which encourages exceptionally small classes that even at the undergraduate level promote the regular written and oral presentation of one's own ideas in tutorials to be creatively criticized by a tutor. Of course at Oxbridge very often the tutor is a (or the) leading authority in the field. Such an intensive pedagogy teaches the imperative of good, clear, argument, quick thinking, and a certain type of self-confidence that expects to be able to offer sharp and clever criticism, together with the humility that equally expects to be on the receiving end when others do the same back. At the same time it can sometimes engender a certain insensitivity to the impact of one's own sharp and clever criticism on others.

Well, but Steve's cleverness and academic promise at Oxford were definitely noticed. Towards the end of his time at Oxford, Steve was awarded a Junior Research Fellowship at Exeter College, the fourth oldest college of the University of Oxford, founded in 1314. For those who are not familiar with the Oxbridge system, to gain a Junior Research Fellowship was (and I suppose still is) the height of ambition for a bright young graduate student. There are few such fellowships available, and competition is extremely tough. If awarded, commonly JRF status entitles the holder for the duration of the JRF to a room in the college, dining rights (with access to some super wine-cellars!), use of the lovely enclosed and private fellows' gardens, a

stipend etc. etc. I should add that in those days all the fees of regular British graduate students, together with an amount to live on, were usually paid by the State, so this was all in addition.

While in Oxford, Steve also became extremely good friends with the anthropologist Michael Carrithers and this no doubt both exemplified and also encouraged his growing interest in the anthropology and sociology of religions in general and Buddhism in particular.

In 1979/1980 a job was advertised teaching Indian religions at the University of Bristol. Steve and I both applied and were interviewed. Steve got it. That was fair enough as in a field where very few jobs were available in the UK I already had a lecturing job at the Open University. But I remember I was a bit miffed at the time that I had been pipped at the post by my friend. Such is the competitiveness of academia.

Still, the very next year I was offered a job lecturing in Philosophy of Religion at the same Bristol department. I do not doubt that Steve was a major influence on their decision to take me on. Thus Bristol, perhaps uniquely at that time in the UK, found itself with two complementary specialists in Buddhist Studies in the same department. And we soon discovered that with two colleagues together in the same broad area the teaching and research potential expands enormously. Over the years we have been able to establish at Bristol the first Centre for Buddhist Studies in the UK and have gone on to appoint in addition lecturers in Sri Lankan, Chinese and Japanese Buddhism.

My recollection is that in those early days in Bristol we had wonderful times — parties, meals, lots of wine — all the usual things. We still went back to Oxford occasionally for conferences and symposiums, Steve driving us both there in his chugging Reliant three-wheeler. I don't remember what we talked about on the journey, but no doubt the possibilities for Buddhist Studies at Bristol would have been one topic. By then Steve was married to Claude. They had three children; so did Sharon and I. Steve's eldest was just slightly older than our youngest, both girls. So our families too saw a great deal of each other.

Funnily enough, just a month ago I cycled past their old Bristol apartment for the first time in a very long time. As I cycled it distinctly crossed my mind 'I wonder if Steve has died?' Less than an hour later I saw the announcement that he had.

Steve was a popular and charismatic teacher when he was with us in Bristol. And on Sundays? Aware of his growing interest in, and lack of field-experience of, the anthropology and sociology of religion I recall hearing that Steve took to visiting a different place of worship in Bristol each Sunday and sitting at the back as an observer with his notebook critically watching their rituals and behaviour.

He effectively left Bristol for North America in 1987, and in the time he had been here with us he had already supervised his first Ph.D. student, Nigel Tetley, who produced a most philosophically sophisticated critical study of the *anattā* doctrine. In taking Steve as his supervisor for this topic Nigel was of course studying with probably the scholar best qualified in the world at that time to advise him.

I had the feeling that by the end of his time at Bristol Steve really wanted to leave. He very much wanted what he saw as the more exciting possibilities of North

American university life. The UK was perhaps too small and parochial for him. Also, he struck me as deeply unhappy about something in Bristol, but I never found out what it was and perhaps I was simply imagining it. The only thing he said to me about wanting to leave the UK was that he thought students would be more highly motivated in an education system where they were paying a lot for their education. Whether contemporary British students, most of whom now pay fees, are as a result more highly motivated than they were in those days I really cannot say.

Steve valued friendship very highly. He made friends easily, and enjoyed the stimulus of interacting with clever academic friends from whom he could gain intellectual stimulation. It was appropriate therefore, that one of his early published studies was on friendship in Buddhism. Here, with his wide reading and knowledge of Western thought he was also able to draw on the rich classical tradition on friendship of writers like Cicero and Seneca as well as the important medieval Christian work of Aelred of Rievaulx. In this area Steve was undoubtedly a pioneer.

When I heard Steve had died, I arranged straightaway for a Mass to be said for the repose of his soul. To be honest, I doubt he would have appreciated it. At least, the Steve I knew would not have appreciated it. He came from a Catholic family but I got the impression he was not keen (to put it mildly) on the Catholic Church. I recall a time in the early 1990s when we both met up again at the IABS conference in Mexico City. On one of the conference trips we visited the wonderful Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. As Steve and I stood outside the main door he said to me very emphatically and forcefully that he could not bring himself even to enter the building.

And regarding any sort of *post mortem* survival he seemed to adhere in those days to the commonly expressed view that we could say we achieve some sort of 'immortality' through our descendants. But I am sure he was too intelligent to see that as immortality in anything other than an indirect sense. It could certainly not be immortality as *personal* immortality, as the post mortem survival of Steve. On the other hand I do not recall Steve at the time I knew him ever actually becoming a Buddhist.

Nevertheless I like to think that with his anthropological interests Steve would no doubt see a 'Mass for the repose of his soul' as being (like all funeral rituals) mainly about the living rather than the dead. So I think that he would understand that the Mass I offered was what *I* (as a Catholic) wanted to do for him, for my once-friend.

Fair enough! And it is in that spirit too, with deep gratitude for our friendship and the fun of all those years ago, that I pray for the repose of his soul. Thank you, Steve. God bless. May you rest in peace.