

OBITUARY

DAVID SEYFORT RUEGG

1 AUGUST, 1931–2 FEBRUARY, 2021

David Ruegg's first encounter with a living Tibetan happened, somewhat incongruously, on New York City's 5th Avenue.¹ In early August 1948 Ruegg was sitting on a bus when he spotted a man in Tibetan dress, surrounded by his entourage, walking along the high-rises of Manhattan. The man was Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa, Tibet's Finance Minister and head of the Tibetan trade mission on his visit to the United States in a brave, but ultimately futile attempt to support Tibet's claim to be an independent, sovereign nation. By this time Ruegg had already developed a considerable enthusiasm for Tibet and its culture. This fascination went back to his early teenage days when, living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he encountered a well-travelled neighbour who was an acquaintance of the explorers Nicholas and George Roerich's. Reading the former's travel diary *Altai-Himalaya* (the book came out two years before his birth, in 1929) as a 12 year old boy, a deep interest in all things Tibetan was kindled in him which constituted the focus of his intellectual endeavours for the rest of his life.

These endeavours were strongly influenced by both his parents, albeit in very different ways. Conceptualizing through the Buddhist tantric framework one might argue that his father provided the means (*upāya*), while his mother provided the wisdom aspect (*prajñā*). His father, Erhart Ruegg (1895–1950) was a highly successful textile merchant engaged in the silk business; his wealth provided the foundation enabling Ruegg to pursue his studies of the Indo-Tibetan intellectual cosmos both in Europe and in Asia. Ruegg's interest in Indian culture, on the other hand, is due to a significant extent to his mother, Aimée Seyfort (1905–2001), a London-born painter trained in Paris who was profoundly attracted by Indian art and civilization from an early age. One of her ancestors served for the East India Company as governor of Fort William in Bengal in the late eighteenth century and she encountered Indian statues and other artifacts first in the house of her own grandmother. Interest in India was not confined to David Ruegg and his mother, however. His elder sister Diane read Sanskrit at Harvard and it was there that

1. I am tremendously grateful to Burkhard Quessel, David Jackson, and Anna Sehnalova for generously sharing information about David Ruegg's life with me.

her brother first considered to begin his own academic studies, only to be advised against it by the then Wales Professor of Sanskrit, Walter Eugene Clark. Being about to retire, Clark informed Ruegg he would not find himself satisfied with his successor. (The successor was Daniel Ingalls who, in addition to his own important study on Navya-Nyāya logic went to train many important scholars of Indo-Tibetan philosophy, including Bimal Matilal, Bob Thurman, and Karl Potter.)

In the end David Ruegg began his studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, where he read Classical Indology for a year in 1948-1949, studying under the Sanskritist John Brough and the historian Arthur Llewellyn Basham. Following a year at the University of Zurich, where he studied with Emil Abegg, Ruegg moved to Paris in 1950, the year his father died. Paris would be the place where, apart from research trips, he would stay for the next sixteen years. The city presented him with the opportunity to study with many of the luminaries of Indian and Tibetan studies, including Louis Renou, Jean Filliozat, Marcelle Lalou, Jacques Bacot, and Rolf A. Stein. Studying at the Institut de Civilisation Indienne and the École Pratique des Hautes Études he received the Certificat d'Études indiennes in the summer of 1951. The following decade was dominated by two long research trips to India Ruegg undertook together with his mother. In March 1953 he set out for a two-year journey, travelling by ship from Genoa to Bombay. He spent his time mainly in Kalimpong during the hot season, visiting Varanasi, Calcutta, New Delhi, and Madras in the winter. David Ruegg and his mother returned in February 1955, yet set out for a second, longer trip in 1957, which lasted until 1961. These extended periods provided him with the opportunity to study with Tibetan scholars living in India at the time, including the Kalmyk Geshe Ngawang Wangyal (1901-1983), who moved to the United States in 1955 and is considered as one of the founding figures of Buddhism in the West, as well as Dharo Rinpoche (1917-1990), the twelfth in a line of *tulkus* from Eastern Tibet, who was also a teacher of Sangharakshita (Dennis Lingwood), founder of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (now the Triratna Buddhist Community). At Kalimpong Ruegg also met Geshe Gendün Lodrö (1924-1979), a scholar from Drepung Monastery who started teaching at the University of Hamburg in 1967 and died a few days before being appointed to a professorship at the same university created specifically for him. David Ruegg succeeded him in this position in 1983.

Ruegg's interests were not solely confined to Tibetan Buddhism, however. He also studied Kāśmīr Śaivism with a Russian Jew living in Srinagar and interacted with a large group of scholars, including the Christian Missionary Tharchin Babu, Govinath Kaviraj in Varanasi, and Nalinaksha Dutt, one of the leading Indian scholars of Buddhism at the time.

Ruegg took his Diplôme de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études in June 1957; his thesis was published under the title *Contributions à l'histoire de la philosophie linguistique indienne* in 1959.² This, his first publication, which received a very posi-

2. A comprehensive bibliography of all of David Ruegg's publications up to 2007 can be found in David Seyfort Ruegg: *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle: Essays on Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2010: 407-418.

tive review by Frits Staal in the following year already shows Ruegg's abilities as a scholar of the highest calibre, displaying the combination of conciseness and comprehensive coverage that characterizes much of his work. Ruegg had already come into contact with Indian linguistics through a seminar given by John Brough and the phoneticist W. Sidney Allen during his time as SOAS, an academic encounter which appears to have influenced him greatly at the outset of his career as a scholar.

In 1961, David Ruegg was back in Paris, working on his doctorate (Doctorat d'Etat), with a dissertation on *tathāgatagarbha* theory, which he defended in 1969. It was published as a volume of over 500 pages in the same year as *La théorie du tathāgatagarbha et du gotra: Études sur la sotériologie et la gnoséologie du bouddhisme*. The significance of this work is reflected by the level of other scholars' engagement with it; Lambert Schmithausen's review of the book (who notes that "the manner in which the author carries out his project will elicit admiration from every reader"), for example, is nearly 40 pages long. In his work on *tathāgatagarbha* theory Ruegg greatly profited from his interaction with Tibetan scholars resident in France at the time, including Dagpo Rinpoche (considered to be a reincarnation of Atiśa's teacher Dharmakīrti), who was staying in Paris with a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship. Ruegg's interest in Tibetan history and in the philosophical treatment of the concept of Buddha-nature overlapped in his work on the fourteenth century Sakya scholar Bu ston rin chen grub. Facilitated by Giuseppe Tucci he published a translation of Bu ston's biography in 1966, the study of which allowed him, as he described it, to be thrown "into the middle of a Tibetan life." In 1973 this was followed by a study of Bu ston's work on *tathāgatagarbha* theory in *Le traité du tathāgatagarbha de Bu ston Rin chen grub*.

During the final two years of his stay in Paris Ruegg was made a member of the École française d'Extrême-Orient; in 1966 he took up his first professorship, a post in Indian philosophy, Buddhist studies and Tibetan at the University of Leiden, succeeding Jan Willem de Jong. Continuing his collaboration with Tibetan scholars Ruegg managed to bring the Buryatian Geshe Ngawang Nyima (1907-1990), the later abbot of Drepung Gomang monastery from Varanasi Sanskrit University to Leiden in 1967. Together they brought out volumes on Tibetan debate logic and doxography in a series called *Monumenta Tibetana*.

In 1972 Ruegg left Leiden to take up a professorship of Buddhist Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. Work with Tibetan scholars continued; he met regularly with Dezhung Rinpoche (1906-1987), who had been in Seattle since 1960, to read the *Madhyāntavibhāga* with him. With an increased interest in Indian philosophical traditions (Karl Potter, editor of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* was teaching at the same time in the philosophy department), Ruegg saw a danger of Buddhist philosophy (especially Madhyamaka) being misrepresented as a result of insufficient attention to what the primary sources were actually saying. During his time in Seattle some of his first major publications on Madhyamaka came out, including a seventy-page paper on the tetralemma or *catuṣkoṭi* (1977), a 1978 piece on the relation between the notion of emptiness and the Indian concept of zero, and a study on the question whether the Mādhyamikas have a 'thesis' (*pratijñā*) or

philosophical position (1981). He supervised a number of doctoral students at the University of Washington, many of whom, such as Karen Lang, David Jackson, and William Ames, went on to become prominent scholars of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism in their own right.

Having left Seattle David Ruegg took up his final academic position, a professorship in Tibetology at the University of Hamburg, in 1983. He joined a group of prominent Buddhologists and Indologists there (including Lambert Schmithausen, Albrecht Wezler, and Claus Oetke). Ruegg retired from his position in 1993 (being succeeded by David Jackson) and moved to London, where he continued his research. Closing the circle by reconnecting with his first place of academic training Ruegg occasionally lectured for the School of Oriental and African Studies and supervised graduate students.

Despite the breadth and depth of David Ruegg's contribution to Indo-Tibetan studies, several aspects stand out as particularly prominent. First, concerning scholarly methodology, he continuously stressed the importance of an emic approach preceding an etic one. What he meant by this was that it is first necessary to study Indo-Tibetan intellectual contributions from the perspective of the respective cultures themselves. For Ruegg, the best route to an emic approach was through the historical and philological study of the relevant material, understanding how specific terms and concepts worked by tracing their historical ancestry, and by locating them relative to the web of other concepts used in explicating and analysing them in the primary sources. Only once sufficient clarity had been achieved in such an emic manner, etic approaches 'from the outside', from anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and so forth could be brought in to further analyse, explicate, and develop the relevant concepts. If one takes this methodology to heart it is clear that, for example, one should not try to say anything philosophically about the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) without having a thorough understanding of its historical genesis through the Buddhist no-self (*anātman*) doctrine, and without first relating it to a variety of other concepts from the Indo-Tibetan tradition such as intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), the two truths (*satyadvaya*), the object of negation (*dgag bya*) and so forth.

A second, more restricted but nevertheless important methodological point prevalent throughout Ruegg's work concerns the relation between the studies of the Indian and Tibetan cultural traditions. He was both opposed to the Indological perspective which sees the Tibetans as mindless translators or mechanical elaborators of Indian texts, confining the study of Tibetan thought to a mere auxiliary appendix of Indology, as well as to the Tibetological perspective attempting to study Tibetan culture as far as possible independent of imported Indian elements. Ruegg regarded both as deficient; on the one hand Tibetan scholasticism constituted an analytically refined reception of Indian Buddhism, a tradition that analysed, developed and defended some of the most sophisticated positions inherited from the Indian debate, on the other hand Tibetan culture can hardly be understood without the Indian elements that the Tibetans incorporated into virtually every aspect

of their intellectual and cultural lives. For Ruegg, Indian and Tibetan studies must proceed in coordination, without one being seen as subordinate to the other. He considered the Tibetans, “the world’s first Indologists,” as providing an insight both into the intellectual history of India’s past, and an independently interesting example of how originally Indian ideas can take root and bear fruit in a very different cultural context.

Considering the contents, rather than the methodology of David Ruegg’s work, he himself believed that his most significant academic contributions related to four distinct areas: to Madhyamaka, to *tathāgatagarbha* theory, to the symbiosis of Buddhism with Brahmanism and indigenous Tibetan traditions, and to the preceptor-donor relationship.

His most significant shorter individual pieces on Madhyamaka are collected in his 2001 *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle*. Amongst the monographs, though by now over 40 years old, his magisterial 1981 *The Literature of the Madhyamaka School of Philosophy in India* has so far not been surpassed and remains the best survey of the highlights of Indian Madhyamaka thought in their historical context. Special mention must also be made of his two-volume *Studies in Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka Thought* (2000, 2002), which, amongst other topics, continue the history of Madhyamaka with a treatment of its Tibetan reception up to the time of Tsong kha pa and provide encyclopedically annotated translations of challenging Madhyamaka texts such as Candrakīrti’s commentary on the first verse of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyakakārikā* and Tsong kha pa’s *Eight Crucial Points* (*dka’ gnad/gnas bryad kyis zin bris*).

Following Ruegg’s voluminous 1969 study of *tathāgatagarbha* theory he would come back to this topic again and again over the course of his academic life, with his monograph on Bu ston in 1973, a piece on the dGe lugs pa conception of *tathāgatagarbha* in 1968, one on its role in Prajñāpāramitā texts in 1977, its relation to hermeneutics (1989), as well as in his 1987 Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion at SOAS on *Buddha-nature, mind and the problem of Gradualism in a comparative perspective*. That this material continued to capture Ruegg’s interest is hardly surprising, as the *tathāgatagarbha* sources involve a fascinating cluster of intricately connected concepts including *gotra*, an individual’s potential for enlightenment; *ekayāna*, the single route to enlightenment identified with the Mahāyāna; *tathāgatagarbha*, the latent Buddhahood present in all beings, and *amalavijñāna*, the primordially pure mind. All of these concepts are of central importance for Mahāyāna thought, but also sometimes appear to be in tension with fundamental Buddhist ideas. The notion of latent Buddhahood, in particular, might be understood as a kind of proto-*ātman*, resembling the self postulated by the Brahminical schools, contradicting the Buddhist non-self doctrine, and may be taken to present a positive, ontologized conception of ultimate reality that fails to accord with the negative conception of the final nature of things understood as universal emptiness defended by Madhyamaka. How to resolve this tension between, to use Ruegg’s terms, “the apophatic-apagogic and the cataphatic-thetic” is a question that has occupied a succession of Buddhist scholastic thinkers in India and Tibet, and the

resulting discussion provides us with detailed insights into their understanding of the nature of enlightenment and the ultimate level of reality.

Ruegg's 2008 study *The Symbiosis of Buddhism with Brahmanism/Hinduism in South Asia and of Buddhism with "Local Cults" in Tibet and the Himalayan Region* is his most comprehensive defence of his "pan-Indian religious substratum thesis", first proposed by him in 1964, which Ruegg pitches against specific forms of a "borrowing model." For him, the entrance of "Hindu" deities or autochthonous Tibetan elements into Buddhism was not the result of one tradition borrowing from another (as, for example, Buddhist tantrism is sometimes described as borrowing heavily from Śaivism), but arose from a common cultural substratum from which the different religious traditions of India and Tibet drew, analogous to the Japanese *honji suijaku* (本地垂迹) model, which proposes a common ground from which both the Japanese *kami* and Indian Buddhist deities manifested. Ruegg's analysis is another instance of his support of the use of emic over etic analytical resources. He argued that the Indian *laukika/lokottara* distinction, where non-Buddhist elements can be introduced in the 'mundane' *laukika* dimensions—while it remains understood that the Buddhist constituents represent the 'supramundane' *lokottara* level— is analytically more appropriate than the etic concepts of syncretism, fusion, and so on.

The work on the preceptor-donor (*mchod yon*) relationship and the relationship between spiritual and temporal power (in two papers from 1991 and 1997, as well as in a 1995 monograph derived from a set of lectures given at the Collège de France in 1992) analysed yet another facet of the *laukika/lokottara* distinction, a distinction Ruegg also pursued in his investigation of the relation between the study of the religious and the secular sciences in India and Tibet. Ruegg was keen to stress that the etic concept of the patron-priest relationship is insufficient to characterize the essential features of this important facet of Indo-Tibetan political history, a personal rather an institutional relationship ultimately derived from the Indian Buddhist concept of the 'dharma-king' (*dharmarāja*). As Ruegg emphasized throughout his academic career, we can only begin to analyse such concepts and begin to understand what lies behind them once we have carried out a thorough philological, historical, and comparative study and have a good grasp of the entire conceptual web of Indo-Tibetan notions from which they emerge. Only by doing so can we avoid distorting the contents of an unfamiliar, complex and sophisticated interrelated structure of ideas on the procrustean bed of etic concepts we happen to be already familiar with. This applies as much to concepts in Buddhist philosophy as it applies to terms relating to the traditional Tibetan political system.

Whenever I visited David Ruegg in his book-filled home on Cadogan Square, one of the most expensive residential streets in the United Kingdom, he would usually sit behind his famous coffee table filled with an ever-increasing mound of journal publications (intervals between visits could usually be gauged in terms of how much the stack had grown), in front of a large Tibetan *thangka* of the dGe lugs pa 'assembly tree' (*tshogs shing*), showing Tsong kha pa on the central branch, surrounded by the luminaries of his tradition. Once the artists of the future design the branch of this tree for the scholars of the Middle Way in the Western world, David Ruegg's image

will, no doubt, find its place amongst the masters from India and Tibet to the study of which he devoted his life.

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January, 2022