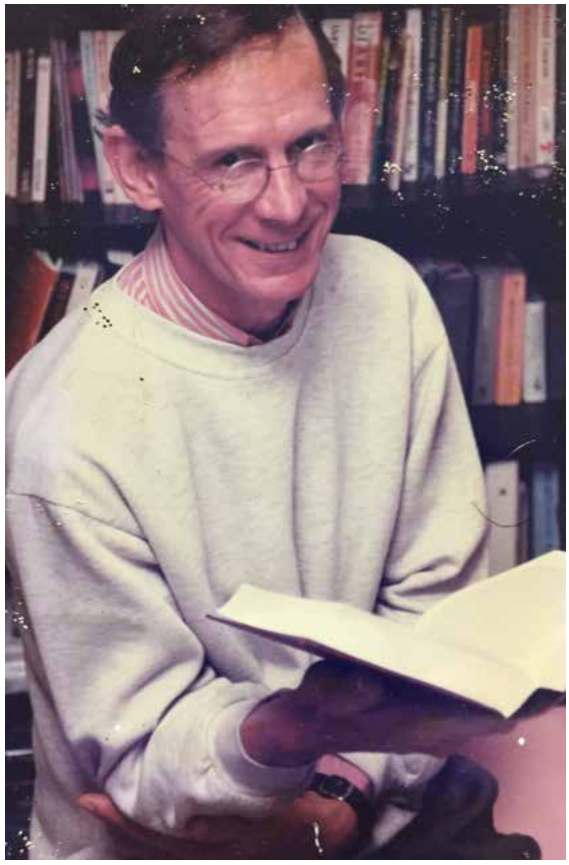

Peter Dennis Masefield
1943-2020

Alexander Wynne

Dr Peter Dennis Masefield, who passed away in Bangkok on September 7th 2020 at the age of 77, was one of the world's leading scholars of Pali and Theravāda Buddhism and a translator for the Pali Text Society for a number of decades. Born in 1943 in Birmingham, England, Peter's path to Buddhist Studies began in his mid-twenties when he left England to travel the East. Travelling the Indian subcontinent by rail, and hitchhiking when necessary, Peter visited the

caves of Bamiyan, saw the Buddhist monuments of Gandhara and experienced Himalayan Buddhism in Kathmandu and Sikkim. Spending periods also in Sri Lanka and Burma, Peter returned to England in 1969 and was admitted into the fledgling Religious Studies programme at Lancaster University. Despite not having the correct academic qualifications, Peter could read French and German well, and impressed Ninian Smart with a short piece on India.

Peter graduated with honours from Lancaster with a BA in Philosophy & Religious Studies in 1972, and spent the period 1973-75 conducting fieldwork in India and Sri Lanka, supported by a Spalding Trust Fellowship. Despite a bout of elephantiasis, contracted, he claimed, during a long trek up Adam's Peak to see the Buddha's footprint, during this period Peter taught himself Pali. On his return to England Peter took up a temporary appointment, the first of many, at the University of Manchester, where he lectured on Buddhism and mysticism in the Department of Comparative Religion. After a spell as Temporary Lecturer in Durham University in 1976, teaching courses on Indian Philosophy and Religion, Peter returned to Lancaster as a PhD student. Initially wishing to work on karma and rebirth, he gained his PhD in 1980 for a thesis entitled 'Thus They Once Heard – Oral Initiation in the Pali Nikayas.' Peter said that Dr Karel Werner (the external examiner) spent much of the oral examination arguing with Prof. Ninian Smart (the internal examiner and Peter's PhD supervisor) about Indian philosophy.

During the course of his PhD Peter was again on the move, teaching at the University of Edinburgh (1977-78) and then taking up a fellowship at the University of Otago, Dunedin (1978-79). Since the latter was a post-doctoral fellowship, upon arriving in New Zealand Peter spent three weeks non-stop at a typewriter, at the end of which he had produced the manuscript of his dissertation. After his PhD Peter settled in Sydney, where he remained until 2005, in the meantime becoming an Australian citizen. At the beginning and end of this period Peter was employed by the University of Sydney: as a visiting fellow and lecturer (1980-85), and as a visiting scholar and casual lecturer (1998-2005). In between, and besides various teaching stints in Sydney, Peter was a guest lecturer at the University of Hawai'i (1985), a research assistant at Monash University, Melbourne (1993-94), a Numata visiting professor at the University of Toronto (1995), a guest lecturer at the University of California, LA (1999), a guest lecturer at Assumption University and at Mahachulalongkorn University in Bangkok (2000), and a visiting lecturer at Mahachulalongkorn University, Bangkok (2002-05).

When Peter finally obtained a permanent lectureship it came about unexpectedly. While he was moving to Thailand in 2006 to work as a translator for the World Buddhist University (in Benchasiri Park, Bangkok), the position mysteriously disappeared, leaving Peter high and dry. Fortunately, Peter became a permanent lecturer at Mahachulalongkorn University, first at its Tha Phra Chan campus in Bangkok, and then at its Wang Noi campus in Ayutthaya.

Peter was a popular teacher who made many friends among his students, but after 2011 he worked mostly as editor of the *Mahachulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies*. When the University withheld his salary in 2015 for no apparent reason – he was eventually paid in full, but only after petitioning the Ministry of Education – he left permanent employment in September 2016 to live the life of a retired scholar in Bangkok. Increasingly poor in health, with damaged nerves in his back causing considerable pain and problems of mobility, Peter withdrew into his apartment in a quiet residential area near Thong Lo, venturing out only occasionally.

In his last years Peter had been working on a translation of Dhammapāla's commentary on the *Cariyāpiṭaka* for the Pali Text Society. This project was the culmination of decades of work on Dhammapāla, which had begun while Peter was a research fellow at Dunedin in 1978-79. After the PTS published his translation of the *Petavatthu* and its commentary in 1980 (a reworking of a translation by U Ba Gyaw), translations of the *Vimānavatthu*, *Udāna* and *Itivuttaka* and their commentaries appeared over the years.

Peter's translation style could be said to be overly formal and slightly idiosyncratic. But he argued, quite reasonably and perhaps correctly, that at this pioneering stage of research, style is not all that important: it is better to be consistent and literal. The great merit of Peter's translations is that the reader does not get lost in interpretation, and for this reason they are an excellent place to begin studying this difficult genre of Pali literature. Another outcome of Peter's research on the Pali commentaries was his argument (2002) that Dhammapāla is to be dated much later than Buddhaghosa, since his commentaries often include material identical or parallel to that found in the Ṭīkās on Buddhaghosa's commentaries.

Peter's second significant contribution to Buddhist Studies was his monograph *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (1986, Second Edition 2008, Routledge), based on his PhD thesis of 1980. *Divine Revelation* is the work of an autodidact, an individualist willing to look afresh at the

world of early Buddhism, and unafraid to form and express his ideas about it. At the time the book was something of a bolt out of the blue, a direct challenge to the rationalist presentation of the Pali tradition which had been popularised by such books as Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha taught* (1959). As Paul Harrison's favourable review put it, '*Divine Revelation in Buddhism?* – the very title of the book comes as a shock.'[1] In fact the title was invented by the publisher, and caused Peter a certain amount of trouble later on. He was once accosted at a conference by a Sri Lankan angry at the 'Christian' title, but on further discussion it turned out that this person had not read the book at all.

Divine Revelation is notable for the impressive number of primary texts consulted, including the Nikāyas, the Pali commentaries and exegetical texts such as the *Milindapañha*. In the days before computers were widely available, and well before the advent of electronic resources, such a wide range of reading was uncommon in Pali Studies. Few books on early Buddhism had hitherto tackled the Pali canon in such detail, and even fewer with Peter's originality and insight. Some of his arguments have since become standard thinking on early Buddhism, for example that numerous teachings were formed as a response to Brahminism, and that the Buddha's 'skill in means' is a standard feature of the Nikāyas, one most clearly exemplified by the 'gradual discourse'. It is unfortunate that *Divine Revelation* has not been read widely enough for Peter to be credited as a major source of these ideas.

The central theme of *Divine Revelation* is the importance of hearing the Dhamma and being transformed by it. It shows that the Nikāyas consistently present direct contact with the Buddha as an exceptional experience which engenders 'right view', and so converts a person from being a *puthujjana* into an *ariya-sāvaka*. Peter was right to note that the main distinction in early Buddhism was not between monk and layman, but between the *ariya-sāvaka* and the *puthujjana*, with the laity and monastics being found in both groupings. The book's attention to detail remains unusual in Buddhist Studies: given the highly repetitive nature of canonical Buddhist texts, it is easy to gloss over terms such as *sutavant*, *sāvaka* etc. without thinking about their meaning. With his sharp critical eye, Peter was able to see that such terms indicate an elevated religious status through hearing.

[1] Paul Harrison, 'Buddhism: A Religion of Revelation after All? À propos Peter Masefield's *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism*,' in *Numen*, Vol. 34, Fasc. 2 (Dec., 1987), pp. 256-264.

The interpretation of the term *sotāpanna* as 'one who has come into contact with (or undergone) the hearing' remains controversial. But *Divine Revelation* points out that in the Nikāyas, stream imagery – like flood and ocean imagery – is usually a negative metaphor for all that is wrong with the world. The Buddhist path is that which sets a person 'against or across the stream' (*paṭisota*), and texts such as MN 34 claim that all *sāvaka*s have crossed it. Moreover, the Pali commentaries do not interpret *sota* in the sense of 'river' (*nadī*), the similar term *dhamamsota* refers to the Dhamma-ear (by which a *sāvaka* hears the sound of the deathless), and the equivalent term in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit is *śrotāpanna* (Skt. *śrotas*, 'ear').

Although *Divine Revelation* backs its arguments up with detailed textual scholarship, sometimes it strays into slightly more esoteric territory, for example the claim that the sound of the Buddha's teaching is a transcendental manifestation of the Dhamma. And yet this point, despite its apparent peculiarity, draws attention to numerous canonical statements on the importance of sound: the Buddha roaring a lion's roar, or beating the drum of the immortal and so on. It is easy to pass over such imagery without a thought, but in doing so important features of the early Buddhist world-view are missed.

Divine Revelation brings into clear focus a number of crucial features of early Buddhism which are easily overlooked: the importance of oral communication and spiritual encounters, the vision of a cosmos full of 'hearers' extending up to the divine realms (and including even tree-spirits), and especially the exceptional role occupied by the Buddha in this religious landscape. All of these points and many more were a major concern of early Buddhism. Peter's stimulating study makes it easier to understand what actually happened: conversions, missions, the emergence of Mahāyāna etc.

Peter's third and final major contribution to the study of Pali was his research into the indigenous Pali tradition(s) of mainland South East Asia. This work is barely known, since Peter published very little of it during his lifetime, although his article 'Indo-Chinese Pali' (2008) indicates the depth of his reading and knowledge. After settling in Thailand, Peter began studying the Khom manuscript tradition of Thailand and Cambodia, in collaboration with Mrs Jacqueline Filliozat, then of the École française d'Extrême-Orient in Bangkok. Peter and Mrs Filliozat produced a number of editions of Indo-Chinese Pali texts, now on record in the internal database at the EFEO in

Paris. Translations of some of these will appear in forthcoming issues of the *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, beginning in JOCBS 20 with the *Asokaparinibbānakathā*.

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I first met Peter in 2008, not long after moving to Thailand to work at Mahidol University. At first Peter was just somebody with whom I could talk about Pali, but since we invariably met in the evening he quickly became a good friend. Already in his 60s, Peter would often reflect on the past, sharing his memories of the likes of Ninian Smart, Edward Conze, and I. B. Horner, whose use of a long-stemmed cigarette holder amused him greatly and inspired a number of limericks ('Little Miss Horner, sat in the corner…'). Ninian Smart was a great early supporter of Peter, but still refused to believe Peter's claim that used tea cups are habitually thrown out of moving trains in India. Peter was also tricked into buying Ninian Smart's old Morris Minor car for £100: as soon as he bought it, Ninian asked to drive him down to Manchester on the very next day so that he could watch the Test Match, and drink as much bitter as he liked.

In the 1980s, Peter somehow got involved with the Moonies. This resulted in a number of all-expenses trips to Moonie conferences where Peter witnessed mass marriage ceremonies. Thanks to his tongue-in-cheek paper 'The Muni and the Moonies' (1985) Peter was an honoured guest, although it wasn't clear if Peter was poking fun at the Moonies or Buddhism. A humorous episode from later on concerned a trip to England with his then Indonesian wife, in around 2000. When visiting Lance Cousins in Oxford, Peter let slip how his wife was famed as a spirit medium in her home town. On hearing this, Lance had Peter's wife remain in the car outside, lest her psychic powers clash with his.

Peter was not a conventional person. Largely nocturnal, he had no time for the comforts of bourgeois existence; my impression was that for the most part he had passed through life as a happy wanderer. When his travels brought him to Thailand, a favourite meeting place was the Queen Victoria in Bangkok. Peter had an exemplary taste in pubs, and the Queen Vic offered a cool, wooden escape from the heat of the city, where Peter could often be found with local friends, such as Nicolas Revire, Stephen Evans, Mark Hoolahan, Larry the American, occasionally Stewart McFarlane, Volkmar Enßlin, Arthur from Yorkshire, Giri the Indian etc.

Peter was social and genial, with sparkling eyes and an endearing laugh; he was kind and tipped the staff well, becoming affectionately known as ‘Achan Chang’ after his Thai beverage of choice. Although he enjoyed his beer, he drank very slowly; I cannot remember ever seeing him the worse for wear. Appearances can be misleading. While not in any sense a Buddhist, in Sydney Peter served a period as President of the Bulkwang Meditation Institute, and was a co-founder of the Buddhist Council of New South Wales. He also contributed to the ‘Dharma the Cat’ comic series, about a pious novice monk whose wise cat take things at a more leisurely pace. Peter took his scholarly work and his role as a teacher seriously; he took pride in his classes, for which he prepared diligently. Peter was also surprisingly sensitive and fairly conservative in his tastes. He liked to recite the poems of Betjeman which he had learnt as a schoolboy, and enjoyed watching old clips of Monty Python, the four Yorkshiremen being a particular favourite; its eccentric joke about an English family living in ‘an ’ole in the ground’ would always have him chuckling with laughter.

Peter was a good listener, unenamoured by the sound of his own voice, and willing to change his mind (sometimes). He could also be very stubborn, and was unwilling to play politics. Perhaps he was too honest for his own good, and simply too rebellious to put up with the daily grind of university life. It is not surprising that his only permanent lectureship was for a few years at Mahachulalongkorn. Bangkok is the last place to speak one’s mind without fear of causing offence, but in a way it was perfect for Peter, a welcoming and friendly place for those who have drifted far from home, and know they cannot go back (and do not wish to anyway).

Peter remained quietly cantankerous and witty until the end. In his last years, when he was suffering from his bad back and finding it increasingly difficult to look after himself, friends would bring him beer and ice, and quite often some food too. When I returned from England, I would usually bring Peter some new slippers and a few English delicacies, such as sausage rolls, pork pies and HP fruity sauce; we both enjoyed the subversive irony of smuggling pork products into Thailand. When the end finally came, Peter slipped away more quickly than anyone expected, but then again, he always tended to confound expectations. For his many friends, Bangkok will not be the same place without our Pali scholar in residence.

Peter was fond of mentioning a dedication in a Pali manuscript he had once read, in which the scribe said he hoped to have made enough mistakes to avoid millions of years stuck doing nothing in the Brahmaloka. Although he sympathised with the scribe's plight, we hope that the same is not true of Peter, whose mass of good merit has surely transported him to a comfortable ''ole in the ground' in Brahma's heaven, and with a steady supply of cold beer. Cheers, Peter, and thanks for all the treasured memories.

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