Lance S. Cousins (1942–2015):
An Obituary, Bibliography and Appreciation¹

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¹. This obituary was previously published in Buddhist Studies Review 32 (1), 2015, though here the publications list has been updated.
Lance Cousins, a great scholar of early Buddhism, died in Oxford early on Saturday 14 March, 2015, of a heart attack. He was aged 72 and is survived by his ex-wife, two children, and a brother and sister. Many in the field of Buddhist Studies and Buddhist practice are in his debt.

Lance was born on 7 April 1942 in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. After Letchworth Grammar School, he attended St John’s College, Cambridge, reading History and then Oriental Studies. He studied Sanskrit with Sir Harold Bailey and Middle Indian with K. R. Norman. After his MA he started a doctorate with K. R. Norman which involved work on an edition of the Saṃyutta Nikāya ṭīkā, which led on to his first publication ‘Dhammapāla and the ṭīkā Literature’ (1972).

1970 saw both his election to the Council of the Pali Text Society (this lasting till the mid-1980s) and his appointment as Lecturer in Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester. There he taught Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Pali, Sanskrit, comparative mysticism, and methodological issues in the cross-cultural study of religious experience.

In the early 1990s, by which time he was a Senior Lecturer, he took early retirement in his early 50s, prompted by disillusionment with some of the then current changes in academic life. In the late 1990s, he moved to Oxford and became active at Oxford University until his death. He taught Pali and Middle Indian in the Faculty of Oriental Studies, and Buddhism in the Faculty of Theology. He became a supernumerary Fellow of Wolfson College, and contributed widely to Buddhist and Indological Studies in Oxford, working as a Research Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies.

In 1995, he guided Peter Harvey and Ian Harris in their founding of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies, and became its first President, 1996–2000. He then re-joined the Council of the Pali Text Society, and was its President 2002–2003. In 2005 he was the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai Visiting Professor at SOAS, with his lecture series leading to a series of published articles. He was given many awards, including one from the Thai British Buddhist Trust UK for his distinguished contribution to the advancement of Buddhism in the UK, and an honorary PhD in Buddhist Studies from the Mahamakut Buddhist University, Bangkok. He was a frequent visitor to Sri Lanka and Thailand in relation to both scholarship and practice. In 2012, he led a meditation retreat in Sri Lanka, with monks and nuns in attendance, adding to the many he had led in the West.

Lance Cousins was a person of great learning, which he used both with the sharpness of discerning wisdom in challenging fixed ideas and comfortable scholarly orthodoxies, and with a compassionate generosity of spirit in helping other scholars, Naomi Appleton says of him: ‘I think I learnt something from every single conversation that we had, even from casual chats over coffee’; and Geoffrey Samuel: ‘He was my first real teacher in relation to Buddhist studies and much else, a generous scholar with an original and creative mind.’ He was very helpful to young scholars attending the Spald-
ing Symposia on Indian Religions, and very active in email discussion lists on Buddhism, Pali and Indology. I remember an American scholar meeting him in the flesh for the first time at a 1995 conference in Hawaii, after being impressed by his many his posts on Buddha-L list, and saying, ‘Ah, so you’re Lance Cousins!’

He was a great help to and influence on other scholars of Buddhism. For example:


He gave detailed feedback and guidance to myself for the first edition of my *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), and his suggestions also led me to write several articles.

He supervised the PhD of Rupert Gethin, published as *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Brill, 1992), which Steven Collins has described as a ‘magisterial study’. In the preface to this work, Gethin describes his supervisor as ‘a true paṇḍita who first opened my eyes to many things’.

Noa Ronkin, in her *Early Buddhist Metaphysics: The Making of a Philosophical Tradition* (Routledge, 2005), says, ‘I am also grateful to Lance Cousins, who elaborated the Abhidhamma intricacies, made shrewd observations and invaluable suggestions, and offered useful references’.

Sarah Shaw, in her *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pāli Canon* (Routledge, 2007), having thanked Richard Gombrich, goes on to say ‘L. S. Cousins has taught me for even longer and I have had many conversations with him about the subject. No amount of footnotes can fully acknowledge either of them’.

Tse-Fu Kuan, in his *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism* (Routledge, 2008), says that ‘I owe a great deal to Mr L. S. Cousins, who read my [Oxford] thesis carefully, provided constructive criticism and suggestions, and generously directed me to many useful sources’.

He is also mentioned in the acknowledgements section of such books as Richard Gombrich’s *Theravāda Buddhism* (Routledge, 1988 and 2006), Damien Keown’s *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 1996), Naomi Appleton’s *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism* (Ashgate, 2010), Cathy Cantwell’s, *Buddhism: The Basics* (Routledge, 2010), and Bradley Clough’s, *Early Indian and Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambria, 2012).

Lance’s authorial name was ‘L. S. Cousins’, the S. being for Selwyn. His book-length publications primarily revolved around work on Pali texts, translations and translators:


He was also working in the early 2000s with Somadeva Vasudeva, a visiting scholar from Kyoto University, on transliterating a number of sūtras of a newly discovered Dīrgha Āgama, including a fragment on when the consumption of meat is not appropriate for a monk. At the time of his death, he was preparing for publication: (i) a collection of lectures relating to meditation, to be edited by Sarah Shaw, and (ii) a translation, with Charles Shaw, of the Yamaka.

His publications, though, were primarily in the form of incisive and original articles, the quality of which is reflected in the fact that in *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*, an eight-volume collection of influential articles on Buddhism, edited by Paul Williams (New York: Routledge, 2005), eight of the 110 entries are by Lance Cousins: three more than any other author. These are: ‘Pali Oral Literature’, ‘The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article’ (in vol. 1); ‘Buddhist Jhāna: Its Nature and Attainment according to the Pali Sources’; ‘The “Five Points” and the Origins of the Buddhist Schools’; ‘Person and Self’ (in vol. 2); ‘Sākiyabhikkhu/Sakyabhikkhu/Śākyabhikṣu: A Mistaken Link to the Mahāyāna?’ (in vol. 3); ‘The Paṭṭhāna and the Development of the Theravādin Abhidhamma’, and ‘Nibbāna and Abhidhamma’ (in vol. 4).

A list of his publications, other than the above books, is given at the end of this review. Their titles give an indication of the focuses of his scholarship: Pali literature, Buddhist history, especially early Buddhist schools, Abhidhamma and meditation.

Lance was a self-effacing person who shunned publicity and preferred to only be photographed as a member of a group of people. His scholarly contributions and influence can be seen in the list of publications, but he was also a great practitioner of Dhamma, though he felt that while scholarship and practice should inform each other, they should not inappropriately affect each other. In his time in Cambridge, he was active in the Cambridge University Buddhist Society (founded 1955); in Manchester, he founded and ran the University Buddhist Society, which had speakers from many traditions, and for which he taught samatha meditation. In Cambridge, he was greatly inspired by the meditation teachings of Boonman Poonyathiro, an ex-monk from Thailand who taught a systematic form of samatha meditation through mindfulness of breathing. This led to him and a few others, including Paul Dennison, founding the Samatha Trust (http://www.samatha.org) in 1973, with him as its founding Chairman. This lay organization is now proba-
bly the second largest Theravāda Buddhist group in the UK, with the largest being the Forest Sangha, led by Western monastic pupils of the Thai teacher Achan Chah. The Samatha Trust runs many introductory classes and follow-on groups around the UK, and more recently in Ireland and the USA, a residential meditation centre in Wales, and a non-residential one in Chorlton, Greater Manchester. Much of this comes from the impetus and guidance of Lance, along with the continued visits from Boonman Poonyathiro. Its teachers come from many walks of life, and include other Buddhist scholars such as Rupert Gethin, Sarah Shaw and myself.

In his meditation teaching, Lance included one-to-one ‘reporting’ with a teacher to mindfully reflect on and explore experiences. He encouraged group work to explore aspects of Buddhism neglected in the West, such as Abhidhamma, the ‘thirty-two marks of a great man’, the devas, and the ‘universal emperor’ (cakkavatti). He also had an interest in aspects of astrology, such as birth-charts, in Jewish kabbalah, and in unconventional mystics such as Gurdjieff and Ouspensky.

The Samatha Trust previously had a tribute page on their website: ‘Lance Cousins—A True Paṇḍita’: http://www.samatha.org/lance-cousins. On this, Amaro Bhikkhu said of him: ‘Lance was a visionary leader and exemplary in his commitment to Dhamma practice.’ Other comments include the following.

Some emphasize his qualities as a wise and compassionate guide:

Lance will be known to many as a teacher of great wisdom and skill; many will also have benefited from the generous way in which he shared his deep experience and learning by way of comment and advice.

Over the years Lance has devoted himself, tirelessly, consistently and compassionately to helping whoever he came into contact with find and develop their path.

I was young and without direction. He revealed a path to me. For the first part of my journey he was my kind, wise guide. Now I am older it is still a great adventure. Thank you so much Lance.

I was at the Manchester Centre at a time in the 80s when Lance approached me and said: ‘You’re very unhappy aren’t you?’, to which I could only say ‘Yes’. He said nothing but placed his hand on the middle of my back. Heat welled in my chest and I felt elated and uplifted somehow. I knew that it was a taste of how I could turn my life around, if I really worked at it, and my faith in the Practice grew stronger.

Some emphasize the power of his silent presence:

You spoke so much with silence.

Having met Lance at his home, I was most struck by his compassionate presence, his ability to listen and relate and his stillness. A truly great being!

It felt healing to be in that straight, open presence of his and also to share the joyful twinkle in his eye.

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Some speak of him as a mischievous magician:

For me, Lance was a master magician. We had our differences, but when I see him in my mind’s eye, I see those eyes that were pure starlight and a smile that was as mischievous as anything I have ever known. He was the gatekeeper and guardian of a universe beyond my imaginings. I am full of gratitude for his immense wisdom, compassion and dedication to the Path. His spirit lives on in so many of us who were touched by his brilliance.

At his final Abhidhamma course I was able to witness the magician in motion. Lance had the ability to make the simplest anecdotes ring profoundly true, allowing things that we knew, or maybe half-knew, to become cemented in place.

Some speak of his knack of challenging people in a way that helped them grow:

Lance constantly challenged us to be more aware and awake. Thank you!

A delightfully argumentative man who greatly enjoyed debate.

Lance admonished me 30 years ago. The reverberations are still with me to this day ... Like quiet thunder!

He wanted us to be independent, free-thinking and not lose our own birth religious identity. I am filled with gratitude and admiration that one man should be so generous with his time, wisdom, heart and humour. He boldly went where most are not willing to go, risking being controversial yet only acting from compassion. We can only try to follow his example.

Some speak of his patient, undemanding nature:

That knowing smile, with compassion and understanding; never reproving. Saying just enough to a difficult arrogant student so as not to raise his ire. That’s how he patiently taught me for 35 years.

Of the many gifts you gave me, perhaps the greatest of all was your gift of equanimity. Your teachings were opportunities to be taken, or missed, never a burden imposed. So I am grateful above all for your willingness simply to offer and let go, asking nothing back.

Some talk of his great skill as a teacher:

When Lance really got underway at a Dhamma talk or discussion there was nothing quite like it. He was unflinching in the way he acted or spoke to help people. A great man.

His talks in the evenings were rivetingly interesting and to the point. His ability to relate to your practice during reports was very ‘human’, helpful and challenging. I was amazed at his ability to talk, one evening, on a subject given to him by the audience; he did it without preparation and did it without hesitation.

His (lunchtime) lecture on meditation was simple and to the point, and his answers to questions had insight, precision and honesty. I remember leaving with the impression that everybody including myself had left with more awareness.

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For myself, I can say that Lance was an inspiration to both my Dhamma practice and my life as an academic focusing on Buddhist Studies. His way of being a scholar of Buddhism inspired me to resolve to seek to take a similar route. His firm, gentle and probing guidance helped keep my philosophical mind earthed and my heart facing in the right direction. Meeting him was typically like meeting a mirror that helped one see oneself and see what needed to be done. His penetrating gaze could see deeply while his compassion gave careful guidance. Prompts and suggestions were given briefly, to be understood as one worked with them. What a debt I owe to this amazing man.

ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

All the following are downloadable from https://oxford.academia.edu/LS Cousins, unless otherwise stated.

PALLI LITERATURE


EARLY BUDDHIST SCHOOLS


1994. ‘Person and Self.’ In Buddhism into the Year 2000: International Conference Proceedings (no named
ABHIDHAMMA

For Lance Cousins, this is not a dry scholastic literature, but an exploration of subtle relationships and a great aid to practice. Richard Gombrich once described him as the leading authority in the West on Abhidhamma. 2

1983–84. 'Nibbāna and Abhidhamma.' Buddhist Studies Review 1 (2): 95–109. An exploration of Nibbāna in the Nikāyas, and then how the Abhidhamma systems shared in seeing it as an atemporal, non-spatial unconditioned reality that was neither mind, in the usual sense, nor material.


2013 [Buddhist era 2556]. 'Abhidhamma Studies II: Sanskrit Abhidharma Literature of the Mahāvihāravāsins.' Thai International Journal for Buddhist Studies 4: 1–61. On the influence of Sri Lankan Abhidhamma ideas in mainland India (oxford.academia.edu only has the abstract).


BUDDHIST MEDITATION


2015. ‘The Sutta on Mindfulness with In and Out Breathing.’ In K. L. Dhammajoti (ed.), Buddhist Meditative Praxis: Traditional Teachings and Modern Applications: 1–24. Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies. This is on the 16 stages of Ānāpāna-sati meditation, both in its original meaning and later interpretation.


BUDDHIST ETHICS


BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

BUDDHISM OVERALL


MYSTICISM


BOOK REVIEWS

Of his 45 book reviews, those available from oxford.academia.edu are of these books (dates are of the reviews, not the books), with fuller details in a bibliography in Journal of the Pali Text Society XXXII, 2105, pp. 7–14:


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Other Reviews Include:

1976. Tenzin Gyatso, the XIVth Dalai Lama, *The Buddhism of Tibet and the Key to the Middle Way*, reviewed in *The Expository Times* 87.


