

OBITUARY

Gadjin Masato Nagao (1907–2005)



With the passing of Gadjin Masato Nagao 長尾雅人, long-time professor of Buddhist Studies at Kyoto University, more than an age has ended; we have also lost arguably the most insightful, profound and positively influential Japanese scholar of Buddhism in the twentieth century.¹ His scholarship, characterized by its philosophical penetration, sympathy with its object, restraint and breadth, his teaching, characterized by its rigor and high expectations, and his service, characterized by its generosity and enthusiasm, combined to make him an almost

legendary figure. Yet, in the end, what may have been most remarkable was his passionate humanity, and his implicit insistence that Buddhism, the study of Buddhism, and life itself, are not inseparable.

Born in Sendai in 1907, Nagao attended school from the mid-primary level in Kyoto, the city that would become his home for the rest of his life. In 1925 he entered the Third High School (Daisan Kōtō Gakkō 第三高等学校), part of the Imperial University system. Graduates of these schools were guaranteed admission to one of the imperial universities, and so in 1928 Nagao entered Kyoto Imperial University (Kyōto Teikoku Daigaku 京都帝国大学, later renamed Kyoto University), from which he graduated with the degree of

¹ A fuller bibliographic appreciation is to be found in “A Short Biographical Sketch of Professor Gadjin Masato Nagao,” in *Wisdom, Compassion, and the Search for Understanding: The Buddhist Studies Legacy of Gadjin M. Nagao*. J. A. Silk, ed. Studies in the Buddhist Traditions 3 (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2000): pp. xi–xxiv. This is followed by an (almost) complete list of his publications: pp. xxvii–lx. To this, add “Indo no mikkyō” インドの密教 (Indian Tantra), *Bunka jihō* 文化時報, June 30 1960: 2. See also n. 2, below, for a volume in which Nagao is credited as Honorary Editor.

Bungakushi 文学士 (roughly equivalent to Master of Arts) in Buddhist Studies in March 1931. He served Kyoto University from 1935 until 1971, in positions ranging from Research Assistant through Dean of the Faculty of Letters, and finally Professor Emeritus. He also held several research positions in the Research Institute of Oriental Culture (Tōhō Bunka Kenkyūjo 東方文化研究所) and its successor, now known as the Research Institute for Humanistic Studies of Kyoto University (Kyōto Daigaku Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūsho 京都大学人文科学研究所).

In addition to Kyoto University, he taught too at Kyūshū, Dōshisha, Ryūkoku, and Kōya-san Universities and Tekkō Junior College (Amagasaki). He was, moreover, Visiting Professor at Nagoya University and, in the United States and Canada, at the Universities of Wisconsin, British Columbia, Calgary, and Michigan. Professor Nagao's excellence in numerous fields did not go unrecognized in a formal way either. In 1950 he was awarded the degree of Bungaku Hakase 文学博士 (D. Litt.) for his publication *Chūgan tetsugaku no konponteki tachiba* 中観哲学の根本的立場 (The Fundamental Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy). In 1959 he was awarded the Japan Academy Prize (Nihon Gakushiin-shō 日本学士院賞) for his contribution to the publication *Chū-yung-kuan*. In 1978 he was conferred the imperial decoration Second Class Order of the Sacred Treasure (Kun nitō zuihō-shō 勲二等瑞宝章), and in 1979 he was awarded the Culture Prize (Bukkyō dendō bunka-shō 仏教伝道文化賞) of the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism (Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai 仏教伝道協会). In 1980 Nagao was selected as a Member of the Japan Academy (Nihon Gakushiin), and in 1993 he was awarded by the Patriarch (Monshu) of Nishi-Hongwanji Temple the Honorary President Prize (Meiyo sōsai-shō 名誉総裁賞) of the Foundation for the Promotion of Buddhist Scholarship of Nishi-Hongwanji, Kyoto (Honpa Hongwanji kyōgaku jōsei zaidan 本派本願寺教学助成財団).

Nagao was a long-time member of the boards of directors of the Nippon Buddhist Research Association, Japanese Association for Religious Studies, Japanese Association for Indian and Buddhist Studies, Tōhō Gakkai and Suzuki Research Foundation. For more than twenty years he served as President of the Japanese Association for Tibetan Studies and was a founding member of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, and first chair of its board of directors. At the age of 80 he was appointed chair of the board of directors of the Ueno Memorial Foundation for the Study of Buddhist Art, and a few years later to the same post in the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism, the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai. For thirty years he was an editor of

this journal, *The Eastern Buddhist*, many of those as editor-in-chief. These positions, in fact, neatly encapsulate some of his main concerns: Buddhist Studies, broadly speaking, of course, with a special focus on Buddhist philosophy; a particular interest in Tibetan Buddhism; the study of Buddhist art; and a special concern for international cooperation and collaboration in the study of Buddhism.

Professor Nagao's international scholarly reputation rests, no doubt, on his contributions to the study of Yogācāra literature, above all his Sanskrit edition of the *Madhyāntavibhāgabhāṣya* (1964), and his trilingual index to the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (1958, 1961). His other major works include editions, studies and translations of philosophical texts including the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, of which he published a lavishly annotated translation (1982, 1987) and an index (1994), and the Mahāyāna scriptures *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (1973), *Vajracchedikā* (1973), and *Kāśyapaparivarta* (1974). Among non-Indian texts, there is no doubt that his most important work is his study and translation of the crucial *vipāśyanā* chapter of Tsong kha pa's *Lam rim chen mo*, published as *Chibetto Bukkyō Kenkyū* 西藏仏教研究 (1954). Moreover, he of course published a number of highly influential papers, mostly on Madhyamaka and Yogācāra philosophy, many of which were collected in *Chūgan to Yuishiki* 中観と唯識 (1978). In addition to his voluminous Japanese studies, over the years he also published much in English, some of which was collected and published in *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Mahāyāna Philosophies* (1991). However, since others are more able than I to outline and evaluate the technical details of Prof. Nagao's scholarship, I would like to reflect here briefly, instead, on his life and influence.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that Nagao revolutionized the study of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism in modern Japan. Of course, there were giants before him, some of whom were his teachers, either directly or through their publications. He first read the fundamental Yogācāra text the *Trīṃśikā* in Sanskrit, for instance, studying the Japanese translation of Wogihara Unrai, though he had earlier studied the text itself in Chinese (or rather, Sino-Japanese) with the traditional Hossō scholar Saeki Jōin of Nara's Hōryūji. Perhaps the major influence on the development of his own style of scholarship came, however, from his elder contemporary, Yamaguchi Susumu. Yamaguchi had studied in Paris with Sylvain Lévi, and brought back to Japan the very finest of European philological method and spirit. But there remained a divide in Japanese studies of Buddhism between those who analyzed texts, and those who thought about what they meant. Even the, respectively, French

and German-trained Yamaguchi and Wogihara studied Indian Buddhism from inside what we might well think of as Xuanzang's world. In other words, the academic study of Indian Buddhism in Japan, based in traditional sectarian studies, took as its starting point the translations of the great Tang period Chinese translator Xuanzang. Japanese scholars translated and understood Indian Buddhist literature essentially in Chinese terms, and what is more, the rarified and hyper-technical Chinese of Xuanzang. Prof. Nagao, with an early interest in philosophy, married philological rigor with philosophical insight, seeking to understand how Buddhist thought works, what Buddhist texts are saying, and how great Buddhist thinkers express their profound insights into reality. In this, we might say that he sought to move beyond doctrine toward philosophy. Moreover, as is especially clear in his translations, he insisted on presenting his understanding in clear, modern Japanese. Rather than using Xuanzang's Chinese terminology as if it were Japanese, even when translating from Sanskrit, Nagao's approach, seen most successfully in the 15 volumes of the series he initiated and edited, *Daijō Butten* 大乘仏典, "Mahāyāna Scriptures" (1973–1976), asks translators to decide what the texts mean, and to express that understanding naturally. To those accustomed to translations into English, French or German, this may seem quite unexceptional, but in the often feudal world of Japanese Buddhist Studies, it was epoch-making.

Although his earliest publications dealt with Yogācāra thought, circumstances conspired to encourage and direct his interest in Tibet as well. Political and economic considerations made study in Europe or India an impossibility. But inspired in part by an appreciative comment of Giuseppe Tucci's that traditional studies of Madhyamaka and Yogācāra were still preserved in Tibet—although Nagao soon learned that the latter at least was not quite true—and by the fact that in the late 1930s and early 1940s the area was under Japanese military control, he arranged two visits to Northern China and Inner Mongolia, where he was able to study Mongolian "Lamaist" monasteries. While it was not possible for him to engage in the type of prolonged study with a *dge bshes* that is feasible today, he published studies on Mongolian monasteries and their academic system, including a careful outline of the curriculum of traditional monastic education (*Mōko Ramabyōki* 蒙古喇嘛廟記, and *Mōko Gakumonji* 蒙古學問寺, both 1947), and continued with the above-mentioned study of Tsong kha pa, as well as numerous studies of Tibetan Buddhist art and so on over the years. Indeed it bears mentioning that, quite unusual for a scholar whose primary focus lay in philosophical literature, Prof. Nagao always maintained a strong interest in Buddhist art and architecture, on which he published numerous smaller studies.

While Nagao's impact on Japanese Buddhist scholarship was profound, his contribution certainly does not end there. For it is due to his initiatives that a number of young, foreign scholars were enabled to study in Japan. My own introduction to the study of Buddhism came from a chance meeting with Prof. Nagao, who warmly encouraged my interest when I stumbled upon the seminar he taught for long years at the Eastern Buddhist Society in Otani University, during most of which he read the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*. It is thanks to the careful critique he gave a draft English translation of this text during the course of these seminars over many years that he was recently acknowledged as Honorary Editor by Robert Thurman in the English translation published under his direction.² But it was thanks to his efforts as Chair of the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai that the greatest number of younger scholars directly profited from Nagao's efforts to internationalize Japanese Buddhist Studies. For in 1991 he initiated the ongoing program which annually provides scholarships for younger foreign scholars to study at Japanese graduate schools, the Numata Fellowships. This program enables promising scholars from abroad to work with Japanese mentors, become familiar with the riches of Japanese scholarship and, not incidentally, inform their Japanese hosts of the ways Buddhist scholarship is being carried out elsewhere. Much of the growing communication between Japanese and non-Japanese Buddhist scholars owes its vitality directly or indirectly to Nagao's efforts. As an indication of the dedication and passion he put into this project, I may mention that more than once, and even in poor health, he personally went to greet arriving young foreign students at the Kyoto train station, and he always made an effort to welcome such visitors not only into his seminars and reading groups, but into his home as well.

It would be an oversimplification, though perhaps a useful one, to say that the world of Japanese Buddhist Studies was long divided between a Kyoto school and a Tokyo school (an oversimplification because, if for no other reason, it ignores, for instance, the long and distinguished history of Tōhoku University and other venerable schools). And while Nagao was not the first to teach Buddhist Studies at Kyoto University, having been preceded by Matsumoto Bunzaburō, Hatani Ryōtai and others, it is his legacy, and that of his students, which has shaped the way Indian and Tibetan Buddhism have

² The background is explained by Thurman in his preface, *The Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra)* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University/Columbia University's Center for Buddhist Studies/Tibet House US, 2004): x.

been studied, at least in western Japan, for decades. Those who held important and influential positions at universities throughout western Japan in the second half of the twentieth century have been predominantly his students or grand-students. Just a very few of their names might suffice to indicate the influence of his teaching, starting with his successor at Kyoto University Kajiyama Yuichi (1925–2004), and including Katsura Shōryū (Hiroshima, now Ryūkoku), Aramaki Noritoshi (Osaka, Kyoto, now Otani), Mimaki Katsumi (Kyoto), and many, many others.

Other contributions to the academic life of Kyoto Buddhist Studies may be slightly less visible in a mere glance at a list of Nagao's publications, but are no less significant. He was, for instance, for decades a regular participant at the weekly translation seminars of the Ryūkoku Translation Center (Butten Hon'yakubu 仏典翻訳部). Almost everything published by the RTC for many years benefited from his careful and often relentless critiques, his demands for the highest standards of interpretation and the most careful translation. His stance as a scholar of Indian Buddhism in fact sometimes led to conflicts with colleagues in such settings. One such case, at a different institute, revolved around a disagreement with a certain scholar with whom he was collaborating on an English translation of Shinran's magnum opus, *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証. Nagao maintained that Shinran's quotations, when they do not reflect the best established original text, should be corrected, since it was clearly his intent to present the most accurate and authentic scriptural evidence possible. This was sometimes not possible for Shinran, who worked of course with limited access to monastic libraries, and without the benefit of modern comparative studies of textual sources. Others disagreed, arguing for the primacy of what Shinran actually wrote, whether one might be able to imagine him to have wished to have written something different or not. Whichever side of such a dispute one stands on, there is no question that Prof. Nagao's seriousness of intent and passion and respect for the sacred texts of the Buddhist tradition, from India to Japan, have forced those who have come into contact with him to think and rethink their own relationships to the materials they study, and to clarify the presuppositions with which they approach their inquiries.

These appreciations of Nagao's myriad strengths serve only to highlight, and contextualize, how he compensated for those few areas in which he was less masterful. He was, moreover, frank about his limitations. His knowledge of Classical Chinese was, as to be expected of a Japanese scholar of his generation, superb. His knowledge of Tibetan was likewise excellent, and prob-

ably better than his Sanskrit. And while his knowledge of Sanskrit was much more than adequate, he was not a philologist. Although he read Buddhist works in so-called Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit and Pāli, it is my impression that he never had much feel for Middle Indic. On the whole, this was scarcely a problem. For most of the materials he studied, and virtually all of those upon which he focused the majority of his attention, the philosophical treatises of the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra masters, knowledge of Classical Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese was more than sufficient. Yet, even when he turned to works written in a less classical idiom, his strengths more than compensated for any limitations. As he and I read the Mahāyāna sūtra *Kāśyapaparivarta* together on a nearly weekly basis for a period of about three years in the early 1990s, on any number of occasions we encountered passages with obscure or unclear Hybrid Sanskrit grammar or vocabulary. Philology certainly has its necessary place in elucidating such materials, but what Prof. Nagao brought to bear was much more powerful. He understood Buddhism, and particularly Mahāyāna Buddhist thought, so well, he had such a comprehensive and indeed organic grasp, that he knew what the text could or could not be saying. We might say, he saw through the words of the text to the intention of its authors, and was therefore able to discern what the sūtra must be saying, even if he could not fully explain the grammar through which it was saying it. It is important to emphasize, however, that, unlike many less cautious interpreters, who are quite sure that they know what the author of a text *should* have been saying, Prof. Nagao always maintained the utmost modesty before the (even anonymous) authors whose works he studied. He never assumed that these authors were unable to clearly say what he thought they should have said. Indeed, if anything, the fact, for example, that he never felt confident to publish his translation of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* stands as vivid testimony to the imperative he felt to fully understand before setting forth an interpretation. On the other hand, it was at least in part his perfectionism which kept him from progressing with his planned introduction to Yogācāra Buddhism, a project the beginnings of which he wrote and rewrote over and over, before finally setting it aside. This modesty and perfectionism, on the one hand, and full command of the range of Buddhist thought and comfort with the intellectual world of Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the other, serve as poles mapping the terrain of Prof. Nagao's scholarly attitude and approach.

Finally, and most importantly, a few words about the man. Prof. Nagao was perhaps the most thoughtful and careful person I have ever met, and not only in the ways to which I have just referred. I do not mean that he was shy, for

he certainly was not, nor that he was not bold, for he was. Rather, it is that I never knew him to act precipitously, never knew him not to take his time and consider a situation, or a question. I recall well any number of occasions on which a student asked what seemed to me a perfectly simple question, with a quite obvious answer. Prof. Nagao would ponder and consider, before replying. And more than once his response to such questions was that he did not know the answer. It took me quite a while to realize that it was not that I knew the answer to some question that baffled him, but rather that he could not sufficiently discern the motivation and intent of the questioner, could not perceive what the question really was, and thus was unable to provide an answer that would address what the questioner really needed to know. It is that care and humility which characterized his approach to the works of the Buddhist masters he studied, and why, although he studied the *Mahāvānasūtrālamkāra* for some seventy years, he always felt there was more to understand, always remained conscious of the profundity of the text and his own finitude before it and why, perhaps, he could not find just the right angle to take to produce an introduction to the Yogācāra tradition that would make clear its essence, without leading to misunderstandings.

Regarding his humility before Buddhist literature, I keenly remember the advice he once gave me, that one should not attempt to translate a text one had been studying for less than ten years. When, again, I was reading the *Kāśyapaparivarta* with him, I would regularly take my draft translation to his home, late in the afternoon, where we would discuss it into the early morning. Many times we would begin with his approval of my translation of a passage, but then go on to spend perhaps ten hours discussing what it really meant, what the text was trying to do. Sometimes we modified the translation—and Prof. Nagao's grasp of the nuances of English was superb—but often the words stayed the same. Only my understanding of what they were trying to express changed.

No doubt, this passionate pursuit of the truths of Buddhism is related to Prof. Nagao's own religiosity as well. The connection between their scholarship and their faith is something which Buddhist scholars, particularly in Japan, generally avoid speaking of, and perhaps even thinking about. Prof. Nagao may have been, in this respect, not much of an exception, in that I, at least, rarely heard him talk about his religious commitment. However, his profound faith in Pure Land Buddhism and his faith in the insight of, above all, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, seemed in some respects to merge, sometimes even explicitly, as they do in his idea of the bodhisattva's ascent and descent, the

topic of one of his papers (1984), and a motif in much of his philosophical thinking.

I have been told that Prof. Nagao mellowed with age, and indeed, when I first met him, he was already in his early 70s. I have heard that as a young professor in Kyoto University he could be rather severe. When I met him, however, the most I saw was what could be, at times, a rather biting sarcasm, but always expressed subtly, a sort of stealth humor and irony. Perhaps part of this was due to the omnipresent influence of his wife, Toshiko, to whom he was married for more than 60 years. Jewish lore says that one can learn from a Rabbi by watching how he ties his shoes. This will not work in Japan because most people wear loafers, since they take their shoes off so often. But I think one way we can learn about a man's human qualities is by watching how he interacts with his wife. And here, in his humanity just as in his scholarship, Prof. Nagao set the standard, offering a model of harmonious, respectful and thoroughly committed unity. They appeared to have the ideal partnership, a true meeting of souls—if one permits such an expression in a Buddhist context. Although I never knew Mrs. Nagao to have the slightest interest in Yogācāra philosophy, she and Prof. Nagao were so much a part of each other that it was almost impossible to imagine them apart. And indeed, after Mrs. Nagao passed away in December 2001, Sensei seemed to have lost his mooring in this world. Though he has left it, he lives on in his scholarship, in his family and students, in what he has taught us, and in our hearts.

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