

Editorial

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This editorial has to convey two farewells.

On 29 April, Professor Stefano Zacchetti suddenly and quite unexpectedly died at his Oxford home of a massive heart attack. He was 52.

He came to Oxford in 2012 as the Yehan Numata Professor of Buddhist Studies and a Professorial Fellow of Balliol College. He also served as my deputy both as Chair of the Trustees of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, and as Academic Director of the Centre.

Two lengthy obituaries, one of them in Italian, have already appeared on the internet at <https://glorisunglobalnetwork.org/in-memori-am-stefano-zacchetti/>. In our next issue, forthcoming in November, we intend to publish an obituary with details of his academic career. He was renowned the world over as a scholar of Chinese Buddhism, concentrating on the early translations (i.e., second to fifth centuries) from Indian originals and the commentaries on them in Sanskrit and Chinese. Here we can only write a brief appreciation of his personality, and record our gratitude for his continual and lasting contribution to the lives of those around him as teacher, colleague and friend.

There was in Stefano no trace of arrogance, snobbery or pomposity; he seemed devoid of all the defects commonly associated with eminence, and was simple in the best sense, humble and open to everyone. He was no less concerned to be clear and relevant than to be accurate; he was a superb specialist in his subject without any loss of catholicity in his interests; he gloried in his cultural heritage as an Italian as much as in acquiring profound familiarity with the manifold subtleties of Chinese. In personal relations he combined empathy with humour; he listened as well as he communicated; he made us all feel privileged to know him. Dame Helen Ghosh, Master of Balliol, chose her words admirably when she wrote, on hearing of his death,

that “his wide-ranging knowledge, intellect, warmth and good humour greatly enriched our Senior Common Room”.

When he arrived in Oxford he faced a daunting challenge. Despite the generosity of the Numata Foundation, Oxford had failed to make the best use of the opportunities which that generosity afforded; there existed an ambitious plan for a two-year graduate course in Buddhist studies, but no one had been found to teach it; there was no professor to lead us in the subject. In principle the University did not offer courses unless it also employed at least two scholars able and willing to teach them. (The prudence of that policy is apparent with Stefano’s death.) Indeed, how could Buddhist studies, which consist of materials in so many languages, rest on one set of shoulders? And if there was no teaching in a field at graduate level, how could the University populate it with research students? Though the University had long offered some coverage to Sanskrit and Chinese, that did not extend to the Buddhist materials in those languages.

Stefano, however, had both languages — as well as a more than superficial acquaintance with Pali, Tibetan and Japanese — and he was prepared (as few scholars would have been) to take on beginners. Pupils came flocking, and within a few years he had a body of devoted students. At the time of his death he was supervising nine graduate theses and establishing Oxford as a world centre in his field. That with this teaching load he continued to produce important research publications is a record few can emulate.

The second farewell is my own, as editor of this Journal. I took mandatory retirement from my post at the University, the Boden Chair of Sanskrit, in 2004, when I was 67. As I have explained elsewhere, the University had no post in Buddhist studies, and though I had supervised fifty graduate theses in the field, and had (at the last moment) raised the money in Japan to create the chair at Balliol College, my retirement might well have meant the disappearance of this field from Oxford. I had access to no resources but my own modest income and it was clear that the University would never contribute so much as a postage stamp, but with the help of a few friends — mostly former pupils — I founded the OCBS. A few years later, in 2011, I also founded this Journal. I did not intend to edit it, but no one else volunteered. My hopes for the Journal I set out in my early editorials; since back numbers of the Journal are open access on our website, I need not repeat them here. Readers can amuse themselves by tallying my successes and failures.

I believe that the duty to maintain a tradition of scholarship should pass smoothly down the generations, and I never intended that responsibility for running either the OCBS or the Journal should remain in my hands for more than a few years. The problem has been money. I have never received any emolument from the OCBS — the flow has been the other way — and have been able to live comfortably enough on my pension; recently my wife too has helped support the OCBS. However, we can hardly advertise a job which carries no salary. Keenly aware of this, I have consistently been trying to raise money (preferably an endowment) to pay such a salary, but have failed miserably.

The University has recently decided, for reasons not divulged to us, to withdraw from any institutional connection with the few bodies it has been calling “Recognised Independent Centres”. We are one of them. So w.e.f. 1 August this year we shall be fully independent of the University. The only link will be that the University still permits us to keep the word Oxford in the titles of our Centre and its Journal. Conscious of my declining powers, I have accordingly resigned from my positions at the Centre (Chair of the Trustees, Academic Director) w.e.f. 31 July, by which time, if I escape the corona virus, I shall be 83.

Dr Alexander Wynne, who has always played a constructive part in running the Journal, will take the title of Editor. I propose to try to help him as long as I am viable, but not in any official capacity. What will happen to my other positions and functions cannot yet be predicted; much will depend on our financial position. We do not anticipate changing the aims of the Centre or its status as an educational charity. Buddhism has always depended on patronage, and I suppose we follow in that tradition. Please note.