Eidos volume 5 no. 1 (2021)
A JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2021.0011

Kevin C. Taylor
Department of Philosophy
University of Memphis
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3262-4956
kctylor3@memphis.edu

Situating Narrative and Systematic Accounts of Wisdom

Review: Steven Collins
Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined
(Columbia University Press, 2020), 304 pages.

Steven Collins was in the process of finalizing his manuscript and final academic work on Buddhism when he passed away unexpectedly at the age of sixty-six in February 2018. Although unfinished, the manuscript was in circulation among his colleagues and was near to completion. The final published version suffers hardly at all except for a somewhat abrupt end that one imagines would have seen a few more pages added to put a bow on a capstone project to a life of excellent research and truly entertaining composition.

At 161 pages, Collins' final work is short, crisp, and even friendly in its approachability with respect to the subject matter. What Collins manages to do in this work is lay bare his decades of specialist research without burdening the reader with smug pretentiousness. Collins, it would seem, was sensitive to this while writing on his proficiency in Pali and French, "I say this not to show off, but as I hope to have demonstrated and will show further in this chapter, it just is the case, empirically provable, that working from existing English translations puts one at a significant distance from the texts, which can, on occasion, make detailed study of them into looking though a glass, very darkly" *Wisdom as a Way of Life* (Hereafter parenthetically WWL, 94–95). Translation, and correcting mistranslations, is a subject Collins returns to time and time again throughout this book. A lover of language will find his detours in Pali (and French) grammar and literature delightful while less initiated readers will breathe easy at his knowledgeable elucidations.

Wisdom as a Way of Life is one of a several books on Buddhism that takes up the task of Pierre Hadot's account of philosophy as a way of life. Collins points to a significant passage from *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, where Hadot suggests the need for comparative studies. Whereas he confined himself to Hellenistic roots of the mystical experience, the ideal of the Ancient Sage, Hadot acknowledged inspiration from Buddhist research. Hadot admits that this led to his shift *away* from hostile assumptions of comparative philosophy to admit that there "really are thought-provoking analogies between the philosophical attitudes of antiquity and those of the Orient" (WWL, 88). Justin McDaniel notes in the editor's introduction that Collins explained his desire to put Hadot and Foucault in conversation with Pali Buddhist writers (WWL, xxxi). This book does just that.

Collins was interested in putting Hadot and Foucault in conversation with Buddhism but Buddhism is a pluralistic and varied tradition. When we begin a discussion of Buddhism in history or Buddhist philosophy, it is appropriate to begin by asking "whose Buddhism?" Collins clearly limits the scope of *Wisdom as a Way of Life* to *Theravāda* Buddhism as opposed to Mahayana or Tibetan Buddhism. More specifically, Collins is interested in *The Jātakas* or *Birth Stories* (here he singles out less than a dozen) in part one and Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification* in part two.

Readers familiar and unfamiliar with Hadot and/or Foucault will find that fluency in either/or both philosophers is no hindrance to reading *Wisdom as a Way of Life*. While Collins is informed and inspired by Hadot and Foucault, he employs them judiciously and sparingly. He explains their place in the text and explains his translation of key words and phrases, but this book engages with the primary source material (*The Birth Stories* and *The Path of Purification*) through Collins' understanding of French and Buddhist philosophy. In so doing, he explains in just the right amount of detail what he thought was necessary to reimagine these two texts.

Wisdom as a Way of Life is divided in two parts. Part One is titled "Wisdom" and part two is titled "Practices of Self." In Part One: "Wisdom," Collins breaks down his topics into sections with the lion's share of this part of *Wisdom as a Way of Life* devoted to a close reading of *The Jātaka Birth Stories*, *Past Lives of Our Buddha Siddhattha Gotama* (hereafter *Birth Stories* following Collins). Section 1.3 serves as an excellent 43–page introduction to *The Birth Stories* and section 1.4 serves as 26-pages of close reading of ten select stories. Any reader unfamiliar with *The Birth Stories* will benefit from Collins' introduction whereas the more proficient reader will find Collins' specific research focus insightful. I will briefly outline each in what follows, but first, a brief word on section 1.2 and 1.2.1.

In section 1.2, Collins outlines what he takes "wisdom" to mean in *Wisdom as a Way of Life*. He begins with what will be a recurring motif, a discussion of language and translation. The Pali words *panna* and *pandita* are his primary concerns and Collins takes care to unpack these words through *metta*, derived from *mita*, *para*, and *paramita*. *Panna* translated as wisdom or worldly wisdom has also been translated as "knowing," "discernment," or "understanding." Collins observes,

> *Paṇḍita* is often translated "wise," which is in many contexts acceptable, given the polysemy of the English word. It is used in *The Birth Stories* quite indiscriminately for all manner of knowledges and skills. It often appears in compounds, such as *āmacca-paṇḍita* (or *paṇḍitāmacca*), "wise minister"; *kumāra-paṇḍita*, "wise young man"; and in animal stories for wise dogs, parrots, and many other creatures. It also appears in proper names, such as Senakapaṇḍita, "Wise Senaka," whom we will meet below. In Sanskrit it later came to have the specific meaning of "learned," from which we get English "pundit," a word formerly used positively but now, in the age of spin doctors and television, often as pejorative. (WWL, 4–5)

Wisdom in *The Birth Stories*, Collins argues, is often a matter of practice and so his caveat lector serves to establish the translation of *panna-paramita* as "Excellence in Wisdom" as opposed to the commonly used "Perfection of Wisdom." Collins' interest in this excursion into translation is to emphasize that "perfection" comes at the end of one's *telos* but The Birth Stories tell of tales prior to the enlightenment of the Buddha and are directed at others striving to excel at wisdom.

In section 1.2.1, Collins makes a distinction that carries throughout the entire text and originated in his earlier work: "In *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* … I suggested that one make a distinction between these two modes or senses of dhamma: 'dhamma 1 and 2'" (WWL, 7). Collins returns to this distinction in *Wisdom as a Way of Life* and explains the two modes of dhamma to mean quotidian and supererogatory. The quotidian, dhamma 1, is an "ethics of reciprocity"; Collins uses the example of Buddhist advice to a king on making the punishment fit the crime (WWL, 9). Wisdom is thus skillful based on the context of the situation. The supererogatory, dhamma 2, is an "ethics of absolute value"; Buddhist values that strictly forbid violence of any kind, urge renunciation, and submission to karma. If quotidian dhamma 1 is akin to problem solving, the supererogatory dhamma 2 is to not be morally blameworthy while being morally praiseworthy. Collins explains with the example of a soldier throwing his body on a live grenade.

> Now, doing such a thing cannot be regarded as a moral duty; no one would have blamed the soldier for not doing what he did. At the same time it is obviously an act that deserves moral praise. So an act of supererogation can be defined precisely: it is the doing of something that is morally praiseworthy, but the not doing of which is not blameworthy. (WWL, 9)

Buddhist ethics understood as the "five precepts," Collins argues, is not special and belongs to dhamma 1; any functioning society must avoid lying, stealing, and killing. The life of a monastic on the other hand is an example of dhamma 2; one would not be blameworthy for not becoming a monastic but is praised when doing so. This notion of dhamma 2 is exemplified throughout *The Birth Stories* and is discussed more directly in part two of the book: "The further type of *askēsis*, part of dhamma 2, consists in part in those practices undertaken by a very small number among the ideological elite, called by Hadot 'spiritual exercises' and by Foucault 'practices of self,' which I shall explore in the next chapter" (WWL, 11).

The Birth Stories consist of a collection of more than 500 fables, tales, and other modes of narrative literature that recount tales of the Buddha's prior lives before the enlightenment of Siddhattha Gotama. In selecting this collection, Collins states, "I have concentrated on *The Birth Stories* because they are the longest and most varied collection, not dominated by other texts to which they are a commentary," (WWL, 13). Furthermore, one of Collins' many goals is to introduce these tales in opposition to the view that these are popular children's tales aimed at instilling moral values in their audience. Rather, Collins argues in section 1.3.2 that "this is entirely wrong in both cases, both a priori and in relation to their content" (WWL, 23). Pali, he argues, is a learned language of an elite class and that scholars have assumed without evidence that they started as folktales and only later translated into Pali. Collins notes the level of sophistication in many of *The Birth Stories* which include literary elements: "verses inserted into prose … often using highly sophisticated poetic techniques such as … the ś le ṣ a, where a word or phrase is deliberately chosen because it can have two or more meanings" (WWL, 23). Much of the Pali narrative literature is specialized like this and these collections of writings would be "restricted to a very small and highly specialized audience" (WWL, 16). Part of what Collins pushes back against is the idea that, because of many of the narrative elements of *The Birth Stories* seem appealing to a young audience, scholars have assumed children to be the target audience. Here it is necessary to point out Collins' repeated phrase: "the external, etic analyst should see Buddhists as human beings first and Buddhists

second" (WWL, 17). He unpacks what he means by this phrase in sections 1.3.3 through 1.3.8 but it is a simple enough argument. "Can't monks and courtiers laugh and be moved like the rest of us? Don't Buddhists enjoy self-deprecating humor? Aren't the capacity to laugh at self-deprecating humor and to be moved by the artistry of tragedy themselves part of wisdom? I think so" (WWL, 16). The wisdom communicated throughout *The Birth Stories* should be construed as fundamentally Buddhist and diverse, using comedy, talking-animal stories, illustrative just-so stories, and, of course, didactic tales that both communicate Buddhist teachings and sometimes confuse them.

If these arguments seem simplistic, it should be observed the level of sophistication and rigor with which Collins approaches them. Collins does not make a base assertion and expects us to accept his arguments. He frequently argues with narrative theory, philosophical and cultural insights, and a healthy dose of linguistic analysis the traces etymological origins coupled with common usage in Buddhist circles.

> The structure, very well known to students of Buddhism, never varies, although the lengths of the two parts do. First, there is the "Story of the Present," which is usually a short but occasionally a long episode about the present Buddha Gotama (sometimes with a narrative that is simply repeated in summary form in the "Story of the Past"). Typically monks are discussing some topic. The Buddha asks what they are talking about, they tell him, and then he tells them the "Story of the Past," which usually but by no means always closely resembles the events or at least the general tenor of the "Story of the Present." (WWL, 22)

Collins utilizes the Birth Stories as his example of "Wisdom Literature" while urging that we resist thinking of this genre as Old Testament but rather more broadly understood. In the Buddhist tradition he notes that in virtually all kinds of Buddhist texts, making them both didactic and narrative. Wisdom on the part of the reader is knowing which proverbs apply to which situations (WWL, 56). Wisdom, Collins is quick to point out, does of course appear in systemic thought but that is not his focus here. Texts such as the *Basket of Conduct* refer to ten forms of excellence and later commentaries suggest that all ten are to be found in the *Birth Stories* but Collins thinks this view is shoehorned in, that it does not really apply. In section 1.4, Collins explains ten of the Birth Stories to demonstrate the many and varied ways that excellence in wisdom and the wise person is communicated throughout. In one story, excellence is wisdom appears to be the capacity to offer comfort. In another the ability to solve riddles is prized which dovetails with a third in which skillful empirical deduction not unlike detective work appears to be excellence in wisdom. Excellence in wisdom is demonstrated as skill in seamanship, assessment of valuable, astuteness, trickery, answering insoluble problems, advice to kings, planning, forethought, and so forth. Excellence of wisdom and the wise person takes on many forms but they are often knowing what to do in context of the situation and thus examples of dhamma 1, a form of problem solving. Therefore, Collins ends his selection of examples with *The Birth Story About Sulasā* because being wise "consists in committing murder when necessary – 'worldly wisdom' indeed" (WWL, 77).

In Part Two: "Practices of Self," Collins shifts from a narrative analysis to a systematic analysis. In reading *The Birth Stories*, Collins presented Buddhist accounts of excellence of wisdom and wise persons. In part two, Collins' interest remains the person in Buddhist writings, but here he will explore systematic Buddhist practices of self in monastic practices through the writings of Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification.*

In section 2.1, Collins states his twofold intention in writing the chapter that is to follow. First is his observation that people who read systemic and narrative thought in Pali is infinitesimally small (WWL, 85). While insisting that he claims no authority, Collins is taking up the reins as he transitions from a narrative chapter to a systematic chapter with Buddhaghosa's *Path of Purification*. His first intent is to do so with a focus

on Buddhist practices of self which ties in with his second intention: to provide comparative material on Pierre Hadot on "spiritual exercises" and "philosophy as a way of life," and Michel Foucault on "practices/technologies of self" and "subjectivity and truth" (WWL, 87). On the one hand, Hadot suggested the need for comparative studies and Buddhism contains many obvious parallels. On the other hand, Foucault expressed his personal desire to compare Christian and Buddhist spiritual and monastic practices. Collins, seeks to unify this overlapping trifecta of interests in his current chapter.

In section 2.2, Collins segues momentarily to discuss issues of translation related to "the self" in both the French writings of Hadot and Foucault and Pali Buddhists texts (they use "self" reflexively as a "narrative actants"). "This distinction between ordinary language and metaphysical versions of 'self' is vital" (WWL, 91) and so Collins, careful scholar that he is, offers his caveat lector to demonstrate mistranslations as he finds them in the works of Hadot, Foucault, and Buddhism. Hadot should not be read as "it seems to me that there are really *troubling* analogies between the philosophical attitudes of antiquity and those of the Orient" but rather gives "it seems to me that there are really *thought-provoking* analogies between the philosophical attitudes of antiquity and those of the Orient" (emphasis added). Foucault should not be read as, "that which is susceptible of introducing a significant difference in the field of knowledge, at the cost of a certain *difficulty* (not strong enough for the French word *peine*) for the author and the reader, with, however, the *eventual* (possible) recompense of a certain pleasure, that is to say of access to another *figure of truth* (entirely unclear in English)." Collins summarizes: "Foucault's French is much stronger: their suffering will not necessarily have the 'eventual recompense' of a new appearance of truth: it might result in nothing" (WWL, 94). Reader beware, translation is challenging and prone to error.

Section 2.3 is interesting in that Collins begins by warning readers who are unfamiliar with philosophical and grammatical analysis to skip ahead to the final section 2.3.3. Buddhist readers may be familiar with the distinction between provisional or conventional truth and ultimate truth. Section 2.3.1 dives into grammatical analysis to get the terminology more to Collins' liking, but this is largely so that he can talk about the many words for "self" and "person" in Buddhist texts. I encourage readers interested in the aforementioned grammatical analysis to spend some time with these sections and not skip ahead to section 2.3.3, however the rewards may not be as satisfying as one may hope. Instead of conventional truth, Collins prefers consensual truth emphasizing ordinary language in a shared world. Further, he spends time to demonstrate the ultimately referential truth cannot be a language according to grammatical rules and Buddhist ontology (WWL, 105). Truly worth the read but perhaps not as groundbreaking for a Buddhist scholar who may find that Collins is saying what they already know to be the case. That is not to undercut the tremendous effort it was to put it all into words; that is indeed commendable.

In section 2.4, Collins looks to Buddhaghosa's text as a jumping off point to continue his inquiry. Collins rarely makes reference to specific passages, let alone quotes the text. This is in part to do with Collins' goal of analyzing Buddhist texts in light of Hadot's "spiritual exercises" and Foucault's "practices of self." In this section, Collins takes the Buddhist term *bhāvanā* or "development" as a parallel topic of inquiry not as a specific activity but as an overall process. He cites Buddhaghosa as confessing "that his entire work is a commentary on a single verse from the canon: 'a wise man, making his foundation morality, and developing mind and wisdom, [that] resolute and adept monk will disentangle this tangle'" (WWL 109). The path described in the text is therefore broadly construed but all elements work together as "spiritual exercises" and "practices of self."

In section 2.4.1, Collins mentions lay and monastic practices of chanting in contemporary Buddhist monasteries for their practices which are thought to have transformative effects on individuals. Chanting itself is always done in Pali because it remains thought of as a language of power with access to Truth. But while Collins begins with both lay and monastic practice, the next eight sections focus on the monastic practices alone. I will list them in a somewhat concise attempt below.

Section 2.4.2 highlights the importance of dress and physical posture of monks. Collins likens this to a kind of uniform, a reminder of both aspiration and the separateness of Buddhist monastic life. Section 2.4.3 highlights Buddhist friendship but with a careful reminder of the hierarchical nature and deference to authority in monastic friendship. Monastic friends propel practitioners on in their spiritual exercises and offer instruction to junior monks. Collins continues this line of thought in 2.4.4 with the Buddhist instructions for monks and monasteries. These instructions move between practical/literal and metaphorical but are always directed toward the psychological development of the monk and the monastery. Collins cites the famous "One Horn of the Rhinoceros" poem noting that many scholars mistakenly overlook the practical teaching that a monk should be "alone and without a second" to mean "avoid bad influences" whereas this phrase has the further metaphorical connotation: one who is "alone and without a second" also means one who is without craving (WWL, 124).

Friendliness is a virtue; Collins reminds us when he explains "living like Brahmas" (Collins' preferred rendering of the "Divine Abidings"). Section 2.4.6 outline four virtues associated with the attainment of meditative states sometimes coined as "heavenly life." Such a monk enjoys the already mentioned virtue of friendliness as well as compassion, joy, and finally equanimity. Friendliness, according to Buddhaghosa, should be practiced as friendliness toward oneself. The practice of non-violence, *ahiṃsā*, outlined in 2.4.7, is meant not necessarily non-violence against others but for Buddhaghosa non-violence against oneself understood as resisting unwholesome desires. And yet Collins observes that, in its own spiritual exercise, the entire practice of a monastic life is violence against a human's natural tendencies. As an example of this aggressivity, Collins draws our attention to the Buddhist "Mindfulness Concerning of the Body and the Foulness of Corpses" in *The Path of Purification* (WWL 132). These practices of meditation on the body regard one's own body as filthy and repulsive, certainly not objects of desire, and ultimately impermanent. It is no insurmountable task to see how meditation of the body as an object of aversion can be construed as a technique to instill mindfulness of impermanence. Mindfulness of death is the segue topic into section 2.4.9 as a monastic teaching to help practitioners see death and impermanence everywhere. Buddhaghosa directs us to not think of our own death, which could create suffering, but to first be mindful of the death of those around us. As one advances in one's training, death is seen in a general sense, not as a thing to be feared but as a fact of existence. The practical upshot to this being that a monk skilled in mindfulness of death is no longer prey to fear, "which has (such) great power!" (WWL, 139).

Sections 2.4.10 through 2.4.15 go beyond Buddhaghosa's text by exploring notions of esoteric practice and the popularization of mindfulness we experience today. To do so, Collins lays some groundwork for the notion of insight and mindfulness. In section 2.4.11, Collins contrasts the practice of *vipassanā*, insight or "seeing things as they really are," with calming and concentration (*samatha* and *samādhi*). We are told, he reminds us, from celebrated scholars like Rahula that the Buddha taught two forms of meditation: calming/concentration and insight. These two forms are more or less mutually exclusive. The Buddha learned calming/concentration from Yoga but he was the first to teach *vipassanā*. Contrast this with the later scholar Thanissaro. He writes that we are told just what Rahula has communicated but a close examination of the Pali text reveals that in practice, the Buddha tells his monks "go do *jhāna*" but never "go do *vipassanā*" (WWL, 144).

In section 2.4.12, Collins continues with the most popular form and most frequently encountered word in the Pali text, *sati* or mindfulness. One practice of mindfulness known as the Burmese method, was created in the 1950s, recognized for its practice of "labeling" thoughts as they arise, and said to be ancient in origin. Shortly thereafter, Nyanaponika's *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* arises as one of the most famous books on Mindfulness, further boosted in popularity by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Collins finds a disconnect between these contemporary readings of mindfulness, the *Mahā-satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, in the fourth section, mindfulness of

the dhammas. Surely mindfulness of the dhammas ought to be mindfulness of sense objects and their corresponding objects of mind and yet this sutta includes many more meanings of the word dhamma. If the Buddha had intended this to be a subject to "meditate on" then it is not clearly stated. For Collins, why this is the case remains unclear but perhaps, as some suggest, it is mindfulness of many kinds; a list of things one ought to meditate on. Glossing over the next few sections in which Collins points out the necessity to implement these practices in everyday life as a process of self-transformation, or gaining "a clear understanding about oneself" (WWL, 157), Collins concludes this chapter returning again to Nyanaponika and Kabat-Zinn for their popularization of mindfulness as we see it today. Collins ends abruptly calling attention to the great things that mindfulness can do but whether he is being sincere or tongue-in-cheek is unclear.

Collins writes in conclusion what he believes he has accomplished. Having accomplished his goal to put Hadot and Foucault in conversation with Pali Buddhist writers. But in reflection he finds two things wanting. First, he would like to see more work in "the sociological (macro- and micro-) dimensions of systematic thought as a human civilizational activity, as well as the institutional contexts – homosocial institutions – in which it was done" (WWL, 159–160). Second, an increased serious engagement with narrative thought in projects in either "spiritual" or "philosophical" "wisdom" and "sagehood" forms (WWL, 160). A project or a call to action for contemporary scholars to take up as Collins passed away unexpectedly at the age of sixty-six in February 2018.

In his final book, Steven Collins happily accomplished his goal to put Hadot and Foucault in conversation with Pali Buddhist writers. In so doing, he demonstrated a lifetime of rigorous scholarly work. His goal to situate both narrative and systematic texts in context is often on display though sociology, knowledge of Buddhist institutions, philosophical inquisitiveness, and linguistic explanations in Pali as well as French but it is love of the Buddhist subject matter that shines through. In the editor's introduction, Justin McDaniel writes that Collins "could come off as quite curmudgeonly" (WWL, xxx) and while this can be felt in his writing, it strikes one as perhaps performative, a tick if you will, of someone who has given more than his fair share of caveat lector. If Collins was a curmudgeon, then it reads as arising from a vast breadth of knowledge directed at instructing his juniors toward a more helpful and discriminating path. I am reminded of section 2.4.3: "[the guide's] work is considerably aided by two factors: authority and friendship" (WWL, 119). I heartily recommend this book enough not only for its academic rigor but also for the sheer pleasure I had in reading Collins' writing, even as it is his final work.