

Roderick Strafford Bucknell (1937-2026): a memoir

Rod Bucknell died on 8th March, 2026, a few days shy of his 89th birthday. He was not just my most stimulating academic colleague, but a close friend of our whole family. This is my eulogy for the Rod I knew.

Rod and I met in 1958, in an invertebrate zoology practical class performing dissections. We had to work in pairs. Everyone else knew someone: we were the odd ones out. Rod was doing a degree in inorganic chemistry, and not loving it. I was switching over from Veterinary Science.

Since cutting up worms and insects was not my forte, we quickly worked out a division of labour: Rod, careful and meticulous, did the dissecting, while I read out instructions and took notes. Afterwards, we had lunch together in the Botanical Gardens.

And this became a pattern. Courses lasted a full year, prac classes were once a week, vertebrate zoology followed invertebrate. Rod and I became friends. But never socially. I lived at college: Rod lived at home. Our discussions in the Gardens were never personal; always intellectual. Mainly philosophy and religion. I was questioning my faith. Rod told me he'd done that aged nine when he concluded that supernatural beings didn't exist.

We graduated at the end of 1959, both with results that qualified us to do honours, with the prospect of later doing a PhD. Four more years seemed an eternity, and I was impatient to see the world. I canvassed friends at college. No takers. When I was chatting to Rod over lunch, quite to my surprise he told me he'd be happy to join me.

So we worked long hours in the Golden Circle cannery to make some money, bought boat tickets, and applied for jobs with the Papua New Guinea department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries. Two days before we were due to sail, we were offered positions as biologists, Rod fresh water, me marine.

In PNG we shared a donga with two other guys, but as we were working on different research projects, we hardly saw each other. Our contracts were for two years. Neither of us wanted to renew. So we went our separate ways – Rod to Japan, me to Hong Kong and Indochina.

That was in 1962. Only later did I discover that after two years of travelling Rod had returned to Australia and got a job with the Snowy Mountains Authority introducing trout into alpine lakes. On his travels, Rod had discovered psychedelics. It was the sixties, after all. So when he came across a substance called 'Mescaline sulphate' in a lab chemicals catalogue, he ordered a small amount – for the trout, of course.

No-one questioned the order. No-one asked him what it was for. Rod, being the systematic scientist that he was, divided his cache into fifty doses and began his experiment: analysing and recording the effect of mescaline on his own mental state.

Nothing better illustrates two of Rod's most extraordinary abilities: the thoroughness he applied to everything he did, and his powers of introspection. The third, of course, was his gift for languages. Who else could possibly have written a dictionary of specialised Chinese characters and a manual of Sanskrit, and to have taught both – along with Pali and German. Just as an aside. When Rod and I went on a holiday to Egypt, I prepared by reading a lot of ancient history: Rod learned to decipher hieroglyphs.

Mescaline changed Rod's life. He left the Snowy and enrolled in a meditation course in Bangkok. A year later he took the robes of a Buddhist monk and embarked on the dual quest that consumed his life: studying Buddhist methods of meditation, and applying them to understand his own mind.

Early in 1967, after Rod had been a monk for a year, my brother and I took a break from covering the war in Vietnam to visit him at Wat Umong, outside Chiangmai. For three weeks we travelled from one monastery to another around northern Thailand, talking Buddhism and meditation and mental states.

Rod had made two great discoveries: a novel method of meditation, and the teachings of the Thai monk Buddhadasa, whose work he was the first to translate into English. I need hardly add that Rod was by then fluent in Thai. In Bangkok, Rod learned concentration meditation, the aim of which is to banish all thoughts. At Wat Umong, he discovered a form of awareness meditation: if during meditation a thought arises, don't dismiss it. Trace it back to find out how it arose. Doing this time and again begins to reveal how one's mind works.

What Rod took from his study of Buddhadasa was the suggestion that what the Buddha said about the effect of karma on the rebirth of persons applied equally to thoughts. Just as the circumstances of rebirth depend on karma, so the circumstances in which thoughts arise and are connected depends on the emotions that attach to them. Eliminate karma and there will be no more rebirth: eliminate the emotions attached to thoughts and they will stop appearing unbidden to disrupt one's meditation. equating thoughts with lives provided the key for Rod to understanding the Buddha's path to enlightenment as achieved through awareness.

This was hardly orthodox Buddhism. But then Rod would never have described himself as a believing Buddhist. He never accepted either reincarnation or the existence of divine realms. What he believed in was cultivating a mind that was fully aware and living his life with equanimity and compassion. And that was what he practised. He was the kindest, calmest, most patient and compassionate person I have ever known.

The link Rod proposed between his method of meditation and the teachings of Buddhadasa fascinated me. The similarity between the cycle of rebirth and the sequence of thought that Buddhadasa pointed to rested on belief that a parallel exists between the divine macrocosm and the microcosm that is the human body. This idea is common to several religions, including medieval Christianity. It is explicit in Jaina cosmology, so it would be hardly surprising if perhaps the Buddha himself had drawn a similar parallel between the macrocosmic process of rebirth central to the worldviews of all Indian religions, which he accepted, and the workings of his own mind that he observed during meditation. But if

retracing thoughts was what the Buddha practised in the course of attaining a state of awareness, where was the historical evidence?

Over the next four years Rod and I entered into a voluminous correspondence, about the person of the Buddha and the history of early Buddhism, comparing the Buddhist worldview with those of the Upanishadic Brahmanism and Jainism, about Buddhist meditation and symbolism, and about how knowledge was transmitted in India, from guru to disciple only when the latter was ready to receive it. Rod deepened his knowledge of the Pali canon and learned Sanskrit, while I practised retracing and immersed myself in early Indian history.

What we discovered, especially in Tibetan Buddhism, were persistent references to a secret transmission going back to the Buddha himself that continued over the centuries to be passed on only to those monks judged by their teachers to be capable of putting it into practice. The secret knowledge conveyed in what in the Tibetan tradition is referred to as the Twilight Language, had to do with how to attain enlightenment. And as the Buddha's chosen means to do this was through meditation, it seems likely that if indeed there was a secret transmission, this was what it was about.

This conclusion left us with two questions: If there was such a secret transmission, how long did it continue? through to the present day? And if not, did its practitioners leave behind any material symbols that later meditators might interpret and apply? To seek for answers, in April 1972 Elisabeth and I met up with Rod in Calcutta, still dressed in his monastic robes, and spent the next six months driving around India combing temples for symbols and texts for references. Our findings can be found in the book we eventually coauthored, entitled *The Twilight Language*.

By the time the TL, as we always called it, was published, we were both back teaching at UQ. Over the next twenty years, Rod came to dinner every week, watched our girls grow up, tutored them in maths – just another skill: as you might have guessed, Rod's first published paper was on a number series in mathematics. For us, he was family.

This is not the place to survey the extent of Rod's research interests. Suffice it to say that while teaching a course on meditation in Indian religions, he compiled a collection of the most relevant text and wrote a Manual of Sanskrit grammar and phonology. And while teaching written Chinese he published a *Chinese-English Dictionary* of specialized polyphonic characters. All, however, contributed to Rod's consuming interest, which was to read the earliest Buddhist texts in their original languages. For if any evidence existed that the Buddha imparted a higher teaching to monks skilled in meditation, it would surely be found in texts that purported to record his actual words rather than in later commentaries.

So Rod, the consummate scholar, taught himself the languages he would need to comb these texts: Sanskrit for fragments found in Central Asia, and Chinese to read texts preserved in the Chinese-language Tipitaka compiled by schools of early Buddhism other than the Pali Tipitaka of the Theravada school. It was for this reason that with two colleagues, Rod translated and edited the first ever translation of the middle-length discourses (suttas) collected in the Chinese Madhyama Āgama.

All this took time. Everything Rod wrote about early Buddhism he gave me to read, to be later discussed on his back veranda. His assumption was that texts in Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese all pointed back to a single source: the teachings of one man – but to different audiences; to young novices who had just taken their vows; to monks of intellectual bent; to experienced meditators on the verge of attaining the awareness that culminates in those three mysterious knowledges that the Buddha himself apprehended during the night of his enlightenment.

As chapter after chapter accumulated, I kept urging publication. But there was always another clue, referred to in another doctrine, to be followed up. Another international workshop to attend. Another conference at which he had been invited to present a paper.

When at last Rod did put chapters together and submit a manuscript to Cambridge University Press, it got delayed by COVID. By the time the book was eventually published Rod had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and required editing of the text fell to me. But Rod was fully aware when the first copy of what he always referred to as his *magnum opus* was placed in his hands.

Rod Bucknell was a brilliant scholar, who worked in ten languages and possessed a prodigious memory. Unlike so many Buddhist scholars, he never tried to explain away differences between texts. Instead, he asked how they could have come about. Did they point to different traditions? Could they derive from a single earlier text? He was fascinated by symbols and how they were expressed, in patterns and anomalies, in why they had been chosen.

Rod was never an orthodox Buddhist: he was a scholar and meditator. But he acknowledged the Buddha as perhaps the most profound analyst of the human psyche who has ever lived. He practised Buddhist virtues, and agreed with the Buddha and the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, that impermanence is the only reality.

Let me end with a moment remembered. Twenty-seven scripts are derived from the original Indian Brahmi alphabet, from Tamil to Burmese, Thai to old Balinese. Each has about 46 letters, arranged in rows and columns. And in each the shapes of letters differ. On the sands of Goa one evening, when the tide was out, Rod wrote out all 27 by heart. And then we watched as the light faded and the rising tide washed them all away.

And when the time came for dissolution of the bonds between body and mind, sensations and feelings, thoughts and consciousness, I have no doubt that Roderick Strafford Bucknell would have known and accepted what was to be with the same equanimity with which he watched that incoming tide.

So farewell old friend. You were exceptional in every way.