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RIA KLOPPENBORG, 8.03.1945 - 4.10.2003
A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

Prof.dr. M.A.G.T. (Ria) Kloppenborg died on October, 4th, 2003, while Buddhist friends chanted the *vajra guru mantra* 'to assist her in her journey towards the light'.¹ This is reported in the booklet containing the order of the leave-taking service before her body was cremated. At Ria's request, that *mantra* was sung again during that liturgy.

Ria was born in a R.C. family in Utrecht briefly before the end of World War II. She entered Utrecht University in 1964 to read Law for two years, and Indian Languages and Cultures with the famous Prof. Jan Gonda for six years, to which she added courses in Religious Studies and Cultural Anthropology in Leiden University. In later life, she fondly remembered seminars in Leiden by Prof. Fokke Sierksma, the rebellious disciple of Van der Leeuw and first post-Christian scholar of religions in Dutch Faculties of Theology, on themes such as hair as symbol of sex and gender, and on messianic and apocalyptic movements. She earned her MA-degree in Indian Languages and Cultures in 1970 with a major in Buddhism, Sanskrit and Pali, and minors in Comparative Religion, Ancient Javanese and Tibetan, and an MA-thesis on Suicide in Buddhism, in which she investigated the recent public self-immolations of Buddhist monks in Vietnam in protest against the war.

She was appointed a junior lecturer in Buddhism in the Faculty of Theology of Utrecht University in 1970. Under Gonda's guidance, she continued to work on 'the concept of the *Paccekabuddha* in Pali canonical and commentarial literature', on which she earned her PhD-degree in 1974. It dealt with the Buddhist ascetic who is 'an enlightened one by himself': he dies without having taught *dhamma* to others. It was her second publication, for in 1973 she had published already a critical edition of *Catuspariṣatsūtra*, the *Sūtra* on the Foundation of the Buddhist Order. She loved this kind of philological work but was quite fastidious in it by demanding from herself and her students that translations not only reflect accurately the contents of a text but also its literary qualities. In this vein she published a translation into Dutch of Sāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* ('The Path of the Bodhisattva') from the Sanskrit in 1980, and, with her students, the *Bhagavadgīta* in 1997, also from the Sanskrit, and *Theratherigāthā*, 'The Verses of the *Theri*', (enlightened males and females), from the Pali in 1998 and 2000. Two more unfinished translation projects will be completed by one of her former students.

Ria became a Senior Lecturer in the Utrecht Faculty of Theology in 1975, but also taught part time at Tilburg University from 1978 to 1981, and from 1981 to 1984 at the University of Groningen. She became a full professor in Living Religions and the Comparative Study of Religions in 1988 in the Utrecht Faculty, the first woman ever to hold a full professorship in a Dutch faculty of theology. In her inaugural address she discussed the Buddha as 'the teacher of the world and the trainer of humans'. She herself was also an excellent teacher. She knew how to join the Buddhist past and its historical diversity with modern developments in Asia and Europe, e.g. by inviting a Buddhist monk or nun, or a Dutch lay Buddhist, into her classes as examples how Buddhism might permeate a person's life also in modern Western societies. Though many of the Utrecht students were hardly receptive to critical scholarship on religions because of the orthodox Christian theology they espoused, a few were much inspired by it. For them, Ria was much more than merely an inspiring teacher. She invited some into her home for all night discussions, music and dance, and a breakfast in her garden in the early morning. For others she conducted, at their request, travel tours to Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand where she was conducting research. Ria supervised ten PhDs, four of which were awarded a *cum laude*.

¹ I wrote this *In Memoriam* at the request of the *British Association for the Study of Religions*. BASR wished to commemorate her because it had invited her in 1993 to deliver the annual *BASR Lecture: Ria Kloppenborg 1994, A Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Sri Lanka: The Panadura Vada*. BASR Occasional Paper, no. 9, 15 pp.

In an interview in 1988, Ria stated explicitly that she did not regard herself as a Buddhist. And she never formally became one, even though some Dutch Buddhists honoured her after her death as the 'Mother of Dutch Buddhism'. She remained first of all a scholar of Buddhism, but one who was not averse to put her scholarship also at the service of Buddhists, Dutch and other. She also increasingly turned to Buddhist techniques of meditation, painting female *Bodhisattvas* and androgynous *Shiva Ardhnarishavaras*, to drawing *mandalas*, and to Western psychotherapy for relief from the *dukkha*, suffering, that was a large part of her life: traumatic experiences in her youth, the death at an early age of her severely handicapped son, and divorce. She found a measure of healing and happiness in adopting an orphaned Nepalese baby girl, whom she named Renée and raised as her daughter.

The interface between Western psychotherapy and Buddhist techniques of 'healing' became a major object of her research in the last decade of her life. In 1998, she founded the working group Psychotherapy and Buddhism, in which over fifty Dutch psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists participated under her direction. It became a foundation briefly before her death and will publish in 2005 the volume of studies on 'Asian Religions and Psychotherapy' by members of this working group which Ria was editing in the months before her death.

Apart from this volume, she edited, or co-edited, five more volumes: on rituals in Indian religions in 1983; on religious minorities in The Netherlands in 1986; on female stereotypes in religious traditions in 1995; on the study of (*duplex ordo*) theology in 2001; and on the modernity of religion, also in 2001. She contributed some 25 chapters to these and other volumes and encyclopaedias, as well as nine articles to Dutch and other scholarly journals, and seven to Buddhist periodicals.

Ria herself composed the liturgy of the leave taking ceremony. It was conducted, at her request, by a Dutch Buddhist nun. It was opened with a *metta* meditation composed by Ria herself and concluded with the recitation of a *metta sutta*. The frontispiece of the booklet shows a female *bodhisattva* painted by Ria. She expressed her private, critical appropriation of Buddhism by selecting the following verses from the Heart *sūtra* as the motto of the meeting:

*There is no ignorance
And no cessation of ignorance.
There is no old age and death
And no cessation of old age and death.
There is no suffering,
No cause of suffering,
No cessation of suffering
Nor is there a road to it.
There is no [liberating] insight,
No attainment of it,
And no non-attainment of it.*

Bunnik, 18.10.2004
Jan G. Platvoet
jgplatvoet@hetnet.nl