

Sodo Mori 森祖道

1934–2025

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Professor Sodo Mori passed away on 12 March 2025. As a foremost scholar of Pali commentarial literature and Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka, he played a leading role in Pali and Buddhist studies in Japan.

Born in Tokyo in 1934, Professor Mori was evacuated to Shizuoka Prefecture in 1944 as air raids intensified during World War II. He remained there until 1950, at which time he returned to Tokyo and graduated from Hibiya High School. He then ordained and entered Ryūsenji, a Zen training temple in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture, where he trained under Gien Inoue Rōshi. He later moved to Sōjiji, the head temple of the Sōtō school. His Zen training took a total of five years.

After his Zen training, Mori enrolled in the Department of Zen Buddhist Studies in the Faculty of Buddhism at Komazawa University, a Sōtō-affiliated institution. He graduated in 1962, receiving the Chief Abbot's Prize, awarded to the university's top student. During his time at Komazawa, he met Professor Kogen Mizuno—then Japan's foremost Pali scholar—and began to study under him.

After completing his master's degree in Buddhist studies at the University of Tokyo in 1965, he entered the doctoral program. His supervisor during his graduate school years was Professor Hajime Nakamura. Between 1966 and 1968, while still a doctoral student, he worked in Sri Lanka at the editorial office of the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* under Professor G. P. Malalasekara.

He completed his doctoral coursework in 1970. That same year, he began teaching in the Faculty of Economics at Jōsai University, where he served first as a full-time lecturer, then as associate professor and professor, until 1991. From 1991 to 2003, he was a professor in the Faculty and

Graduate School of Letters at Aichi Gakuin University. His research was highly regarded by the Japanese academic community, receiving the Eastern Study Prize in 1989, the Special Prize of the Society for the Study of Pali and Buddhist Culture in 2002, and the Suzuki Foundation for Academic Work's Special Prize (the Suzuki Prize) in 2016.

Professor Mori's work extended far beyond Japan. In 1975, he conducted research for four months at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. From 1985 to 1986, he was a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge, and in 1990, he served as a visiting professor at the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, part of the University of Kelaniya. These experiences led him to greatly expand the international dimension of his academic career.

From 1990 to his final days, he held the position of Regional Representative of the Pali Text Society for Japan. Keeping in touch with European scholars such as Professor K. R. Norman and Dr Margaret Cone, he was passionate about making contributions to the Pali Text Society in Japan. From 1972 to 2012, Mori served as chief editor of *Bukkyō Kenkyū* (*Buddhist Studies*), overseeing all forty issues. The many scholarly articles published in this journal include works by Kogen Mizuno, Akira Hirakawa, P. V. Bapat, Heinz Bechert, K. R. Norman, and other eminent scholars. They will no doubt remain influential in the field of Buddhist studies.

A comprehensive list of Professor Mori's publications up to 2002 appeared in *Buddhist and Indian Studies in Honour of Professor Sodo Mori* (Hamamatsu: International Buddhist Association, 2002, xv–xxii). The present journal issue includes the list of his major works before 2002, along with his principal publications since 2002, with Japanese titles translated into English.

His early scholarship was consolidated into a monograph which offers a philological analysis of the entire Pali commentarial corpus (*Pāri Bukkyō chūshaku bunken no kenkyū*, 1984). While building faithfully on Adikaram's findings, Mori also introduces original contributions, including a reevaluation of source chronologies and the order in which the commentaries were composed. Although portions of this work appeared as English-language articles and as a self-published monograph, *Studies of the Pali Commentaries*, it remains invaluable for its systematic synthesis.

The fourth section of the book is particularly noteworthy for its sophisticated analysis of the doctrinal differences between the Mahāvihāra and Abhayagirivihāra traditions. Drawing on both Pali commentaries (*aṭṭha-*

kathā) and subcommentaries (*tīkā*), Mori clarifies the doctrines of the Abhayagirivihāra tradition and demonstrates how the differences between the two traditions align with distinctions between the *Visuddhimagga* and *Vimuttimagga*. Few other studies have treated Abhayagirivihāra thought so comprehensively, using both Pali commentaries and sub-commentaries as well as Chinese sources.¹

Remarkably, in his eighties, Professor Mori published his magnum opus on Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka (*Suriranka no Daijōbukkyō*, 2015). This work remains largely unknown outside Japan and I would therefore like to remedy this situation somewhat by introducing it here.

Research on Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka advanced significantly in the second half of the twentieth century, especially through the works of Heinz Bechert (1932–2005), after which surveys and discoveries continued. In his book, Mori provides an exhaustive review of prior scholarship from Sri Lanka, the West, and Japan, as shown in Chapter 2 (‘Research History’) and the extensive bibliography. No comparable literature review exists in Sri Lanka or the West. What makes the book especially original is its use of Chinese-language sources—often inaccessible to scholars in Sri Lanka and the West—and its engagement with often-overlooked archaeological material, combining rich information with incisive analysis.

Part I, ‘Maitreya Bodhisattva in Sri Lanka’, examines references to Maitreya in Pali texts (Chapter 1) and identifies Mahāyāna representations of Maitreya (Chapter 2). While Chapter 1 finds no distinct Mahāyāna depiction of Maitreya in the Pali texts transmitted by the Mahāvihāra, it does reveal that a Maitreya story cited in the *Visuddhimagga* corresponds to one in the *Za piyu jing* [Taisho 204] (pp. 71–75). Chapter 2 identifies eight Mahāyāna Maitreya images by focusing on triadic statuary with one buddha and two bodhisattvas, determining that when Avalokiteśvara appears as one of the flanking attendants, the other Maitreya figure can be identified as the Mahāyāna Maitreya (pp. 118–125).

Part II, ‘Avalokiteśvara in Sri Lanka’, finds that Avalokiteśvara is absent from Pali texts and traces the introduction of Avalokiteśvara religious

1 Lance Cousins’ much later study—‘The Teachings of the Abhayagiri School’ in Peter Skilling and others, ed., *How Theravāda is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2012), 67–127—covers some of the same ground, but appears to be unaware of Mori’s earlier work; both Mori and Cousins independently argued that the *Vimuttimagga* should be regarded as a work of the Abhayagirivihāra. (Editors)

beliefs and practices to Sri Lanka via South Indian immigrant merchants, as shown by the Thiriyai rock inscription from around the eighth century (Chapter 1). Of the 144 major Mahāyāna statues, thirty-seven are Avalokiteśvara (Chapter 2). Even after Mahāyāna Buddhism declined in Sri Lanka, Avalokiteśvara survived as the local deity Nātha, and his imagery thus found continued usage.

Part III, ‘Esoteric Buddhism in Sri Lanka’, is as long as Parts I and II combined and forms the book’s centerpiece. Chapter 2 surveys esoteric texts criticized in Pali and Sinhala sources. Chapter 3 identifies fifty-one esoteric statues, including Vajrasattva and Tārā. Chapter 4 examines Chinese accounts of the visits of the China-based esoteric Buddhism teachers Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra to Sri Lanka. Examining the biographies of Vajrabodhi, such as Lü Xiang’s *Jingangzhi sanzang xingji* (T 2157), the chapter emphasizes their value as a historical source for Sri Lanka during that time. Mori supports the view that Amoghavajra was born in Sri Lanka and went to China by sea, based on Yuanzhao’s *Zhenyuan xinding shijiao lu* (T 2157) (pp. 243–250), and identifies the Sri Lankan king he met as Aggabodhi VI (r. 717–756) (pp. 257–258).

In the first part of the conclusion, Mori argues that the sort of Mahāyāna he identifies as having been adopted in Sri Lankan Theravāda aligns with the findings of the latest research on the relationship between monastic groups (*nikāyas*) and Mahāyāna in South Asia (pp. 307–309). The second chapter contends that the survival of Avalokiteśvara statues and esoteric Buddhism in altered forms, that is, after the disappearance of Mahāyāna in Sri Lanka, was due in part to King Parākramabāhu I’s Buddhist reforms, which targeted the monastic community while excluding laypeople (pp. 310–329). The book’s enduring value lies in Mori’s thorough integration of textual and archaeological sources.

Professor Mori was also deeply dedicated to teaching. I first met him in 2000 as a graduate student at the University of Tokyo. After then, he regularly led a Pali study group for me and other students. Since 2010, when I joined the University of Tokyo as an associate professor, Mori formed the ‘Aṭṭhakathā Club’, in which he continued to regularly engage in collaborative research together with me and Professor Takatsugu Hayashi (Hōsen College of Childhood Education).

Throughout his life, Professor Mori devoted himself passionately to research. His disciplined approach prioritized empirical rigor above all. The intellectual intensity with which he engaged both in Japanese and in-

ternational scholarship, and his steadfast commitment to writing for the most discerning readers rather than catering to popular tastes are the qualities that have come to define his work.

Although Professor Mori underwent Zen training in the Sōtō school and remained a licensed priest until his death, he never donned vestments. He had a charming family, grew out his hair, and worked at the University as a professor in the appearance of a lay believer. He never incorporated his experience of Zen practice into the interpretation of the Pali texts he studied. On the contrary, Mori openly disdained scholarship that brought personal religious beliefs into textual research. He deeply respected Professor Kogen Mizuno, who, like him, was a Zen priest and yet engaged in rigorous philological study of Pali texts. Mori firmly believed that research must be empirical and maintained a lifelong commitment to forming evidence-based arguments.

Following a Zen tradition that priests leave behind a death verse, Professor Mori chose the following poem by Ryōkan (1758–1831), a Japanese Sōtō Zen priest, as his death verse:

裏を見せ表を見せて散る紅葉

Ura o mise, omote o misete, chiru momiji

Showing its back and front, a maple leaf flutters down.

Like many other Japanese poems, these brief lines contain a wealth of layered meanings. The ‘back’ of the maple leaf is open to many interpretations, but the ‘front’ seems to evoke Professor Mori’s life as a scholar. Most of all, the image of a vibrant red maple leaf drifting to the ground alludes to his own passing and expresses the Buddhist teaching of impermanence.

Sodo Mori: Bibliography

Abbreviations

<i>BK</i>	<i>Bukkyō kenkyū</i> 仏教研究
<i>IBK</i>	<i>Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū</i> 印度学仏教学研究
<i>JJK</i>	<i>Jōsai jinbun kenkyū</i> 城西人文研究
<i>JDKKK</i>	<i>Jōsai daigaku kyōyō kankei kiyō</i> 城西大学教養関係紀要
<i>JPTS</i>	<i>Journal of the Pali Text Society</i>
<i>PBB</i>	<i>Pārigaku Bukkyōbunkagaku</i> パーリ学仏教文化学

A. Books in English

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2. Co-editor with Y. Karunadasa and Endo Toshiichi, *Pāli Aṭṭhakathā Correspondence Table* (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1994).
3. *Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Nisshin-shi: Sodō Mori (self publication), 1999).

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