

In memoriam Johannes Bronkhorst (1946-2025)

On behalf of the Department of South Asian Studies, its alumni and friends, we are deeply saddened to announce the death of Johannes Bronkhorst, Honorary Professor of the Section, which took place at around midday on May 14, 2025.

Johannes Bronkhorst was born on July 17, 1946 in Schiedam, the Netherlands. After studying mathematics and physics at the University of Leiden, he went to India to study Sanskrit, Pali and Indian Studies, first in Jaipur, Rajasthan, then at the University of Pune, Maharashtra. He obtained his doctorate from the University of Pune in 1979, then a second doctorate from Leiden University in 1980, dealing with traditional Indian grammar.¹ He remained at Leiden as a researcher until 1987, when he was appointed Professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at the University of Lausanne, where he taught until his retirement in 2011.

His studies and insatiable thirst for understanding enabled Johannes to acquire a deep and wide-ranging mastery of Sanskrit language and literature. He was, of course, perfectly fluent in English and French, expressing himself in the latter with a charming Dutch accent sometimes tinged with Vaudois tones. For him, scientific research was not just a job, but his hobby and his life. Johannes seemed to put down his pen only very rarely, and dedicated most of his time to knowledge, in the broadest sense.

He published hundreds of articles and dozens of books, testifying to his boundless interest and curiosity in everything to do with ancient India, from grammar and the science of language to philosophy, religion, science, and meditation. In the last few years of his research, Johannes also broadened his field of interest and expertise to include psychology and neuroscience.² He developed his discourse around Indian thought in its context, around the history of ideas, their evolution, and the results of exchanges between ancient theorists. Throughout his career, he tirelessly passed on his knowledge through lectures, conferences, and visits to other universities. A great teacher, writer and orator, his eloquent, direct and convincing language, as well as the clarity of his argumentation, made his most complex thoughts and reasoning accessible, both orally and in writing.

His written output is so vast that there can be no question here of even superficially summarizing the results of his discoveries. Throughout his investigations, Johannes was constantly guided by the quest for truth, which he tirelessly pursued with both scientific and moral probity. In his work, two principles seem to have guided him: to constantly question and to get off the beaten track; two elements he wanted to pass on to his students. He continually encouraged re-evaluating, asking questions, where few - if any - people did.

In this way, he encouraged to think about gaps, those spaces that highlight shifts in thinking, the interstices of thought, as it were. On his office door was a "Mind the gap" sign, of the type

¹ Results of this research have been published under the title *Tradition and Argument in Classical Indian Linguistics*. Leiden: Brill, 1986.

² Many of his publications are available on the following websites:

<https://applicationspub.unil.ch/interpub/noauth/php/Un/UnPers.php?PerNum=3139&LanCode=8&menu=pub>
<https://unil.academia.edu/JohannesBronkhorst>

found on the London Underground. Was this very concrete expression on his door a reference to apparent gaps - seemingly filled with emptiness - in the world of ancient and modern thought, but which may in truth constitute levers of research, and indeed filled with answers to our questions, truths we can dig into as researchers?

Likewise, death, that void, that abyssal nothingness for those who remain, but which is part of the living so as to bring us closer to the things that really matter in this world. It calls us to order, so to speak, so that we can navigate the ocean of life with as much happiness and dignity as possible.

Johannes perfected the art of stepping outside the box to examine with fresh eyes and re-evaluate everything that had previously been taken for granted. In concrete terms, this mastery of the art of “thinking outside the box” enabled him to challenge a theory that was tirelessly repeated as a fundamental and undeniable “fact” in all histories of Buddhism, namely that Buddhism arose as a reaction to Brahmanism, as a kind of Protestantism. In his seminal work *Greater Magadha*,³ arguing on the basis of cultural, socio-religious, grammatical and even medical data, Johannes convincingly proved that this was not the case, and that Buddhism - like Jainism for that matter - originated in a region to the east of the Gangetic plain, far from the great centers of Vedism at the time, a region he dubbed Greater Magadha. In his magisterial trilogy, beginning with *Greater Magadha*, followed by *Buddhism in the Shadows of Brahmanism*,⁴ and *How the Brahmins Won. From Alexander to the Guptas*,⁵ he fundamentally rewrote the history of these religions in ancient India, re-examining the power struggles that pitted them against each other in their quest for royal support, culminating in the disappearance of Buddhism from Indian soil and the victory of Brahmanism, which then spread throughout the sub-continent and even Southeast Asia.

In recent times, drawing on the latest advances in neuroscience and psychology - fields that fascinated him - Johannes even went so far as to question whether the Four Noble Truths, the pillars and foundations of Buddhism, were scientifically verifiable and objectively true - something no one had thought of doing before him.⁶

Through his enthusiasm and generosity, Johannes inspired many vocations in the most diverse fields of Indian studies. Several generations of young scholars benefited from his unfailing support, generous encouragement and stimulating exchanges. At the Department of Oriental Studies (since renamed Department of South Asian Studies), he created an atmosphere of camaraderie and freedom of expression. He was always ready to make new acquaintances and engage in discussion on a wide range of subjects, and he always added a touch of humor to these exchanges. However, Johannes didn't hesitate to express an unpopular truth, and could sometimes seem abrupt. But he did so out of a love of honesty, both intellectual and personal. And beyond his admirable qualities as a researcher, Johannes had a very human sensibility. He knew how to listen, understand, support and encourage in friendly exchanges, on spiritual,

³ Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Greater Magadha*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

⁴ Bronkhorst, Johannes. *Buddhism in the Shadows of Brahmanism*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

⁵ Bronkhorst, Johannes. *How the Brahmins Won. From Alexander to the Guptas*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

⁶ For those who are interested, his answer is yes! See Bronkhorst, Johannes. 2023. The Buddhist Noble Truths: Are They True? *Religions* 14: 82. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010082>

philosophical or even existential subjects. In his research guidance, he encouraged his students to question and to question themselves relentlessly. And the same applied to the more general themes of life.

For Johannes, the true love of his life was his wife Joy Manné Lewis, a painter and specialist in Buddhist psychology. Between them, they formed an exemplary couple for decades, truly “eccentric” in the best sense of the word. They enjoyed life to the full, dividing their time, since Johannes' retirement, between their Swiss home in Pully in summer, and the Canaries in winter. Nevertheless, Johannes feared more than anything else a difficult end to life and the inevitable decline of old age, illness and death. Together with Joy, who had been ill for several years, they decided not to wait for the end, but to make the first move. They went hand in hand, with serenity and dignity, united in death as in life.

Without movement of the breath, but with an assured heart,
Free from desire and tranquil - this is how the wise
Come to their end. Through the throes of death unshaken,
Their spirit, like an extinguished flame, finds liberation.

Mahāparinibbānasutta 6.15 (From the French translation by Jeanne Schut)

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