

At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on February 15, 2005, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Masatoshi Nagatomi was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.

MASATOSHI NAGATOMI

BORN: September 1, 1926

DIED: June 30, 2000

Professor Masatoshi Shoshun Nagatomi was born on September 1, 1926 in the town of Kuroi, in Yamaguchi Prefecture in Western Japan, as the eldest son and presumed successor to the family Buddhist temple, belonging to the Jôdo Shinshû sect.

As a young man Mas traveled the country with his father and grandfather, who were Buddhist priests, learning the sutras in preparation for the day when he would succeed to the headship of the temple. But life took a new direction when Mas and his parents moved to the United States, where his father became a Buddhist missionary.

Mas was sent back to Japan for his college education at Ryûkoku University, later transferring to Kyoto University, where he received his B.A. in Indian Philosophy and Buddhism. Mas found study nearly impossible. Conscripted to the Kobe Shipyard, he and his fellow students barely survived starvation and extremely harsh conditions of labor. Meanwhile, his parents were interned at Manzanar, one of the camps where Japanese and Japanese-Americans were confined during the war.

After the war, Mas returned to the United States, where he married Masumi Mary Kimura. Recognized as a gifted student, Mas proceeded to Harvard, where he received his Ph.D. in 1957, under the guidance of Professor Daniel Ingalls. His dissertation was titled, "An English Translation and Annotation of the Pramânasiddhi Chapter of Dharmakîrti's Pramânâvârttika."

Mas was asked to stay on at Harvard as Instructor of Sanskrit. In 1969 he was named Harvard's first Professor of Buddhist Studies in the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies. Over his thirty-eight-year tenure at Harvard, Mas was also affiliated with the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, the Divinity School, and the Center for the Study of World Religions.

Mas witnessed vast changes in the field of Buddhist Studies over his career. When he was first appointed at Harvard, Buddhism remained a largely academic branch of scholarship

concentrating on the study and translation of texts, analytic study of Buddhist doctrine, and archival studies of Buddhist history, arts, and the like. But during the 1960s, a great flowering of interest in Buddhism took place, with results that Mas certainly could not have predicted. Although Mas' specialization in his own scholarship on Buddhism lay in the area of logic and epistemology in Indian Buddhism, students flocked to him with questions about Buddhism not only in India but also in Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and in the West. Besides undergraduate and graduate students at Harvard, scholars of Indian Buddhism, especially, came to consult Mas from around the globe.

Faced with an unexpected onslaught of students from every imaginable area of Buddhist Studies, Mas taught broadly, regularly teaching in overload such courses as a year-long introduction to Buddhism, a course on Buddhist concepts of nature, courses in Sanskrit and Pali, as well as a wide variety of seminars for his graduate students. Subsequent generations of scholars of Buddhism have not attempted to address so wide an area of Buddhist Studies. At most, a scholar might address issues of Buddhism in one country or region and would study the languages required for that sphere. By contrast, Mas mastered virtually all the major languages relevant to the study of Buddhism and taught on Buddhism in all the areas where the religion is found. In the breadth of his approach to the study of Buddhism, Mas had no peers. One proof of this is that after his retirement, no fewer than three searches were launched to replace his contribution, by the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, the Divinity School, and the Committee on the Study of Religion, each hoping to fill only a single corner of the territory Mas had covered by himself alone.

Mas' former student Jan Nattier, now Professor at Indiana University, recalled her first visit to Mas' office this way:

Mas [was] sitting behind a desk that was covered with huge piles of paper: books, journal articles, student papers, and correspondence. Protruding from one of the myriad stacks was a letter typed on an old-fashioned manual typewriter, with a return address of 644 Main Street.

During most of his years at Harvard, Mas was the only faculty member in the entire field of Buddhist Studies, and students came to him for help with an astounding range of topics, ranging from Indian art to Tibetan philosophy to Japanese religious dance. It would have been easy for him to turn people away, to say, "that's not my field," but his impulse to help was far stronger than his instinct for self-preservation.

The stacks on his desk grew ever higher; the list of his students grew ever longer.... He struggled to respond to them as best he could.... A dozen years after my arrival in Cambridge, when I visited Mas in his office just before leaving town to take a job, the letter from 644 Main Street was still there.

In spite of nearly overwhelming demands in guiding his many students, Mas nevertheless found time to pursue his own area of scholarship. Buddhist Studies' work in the area of the textual study of his dissertation advanced, and Mas realized that he would need to learn Tibetan in order to revise and publish it. He revised over a number of years, learning Tibetan, which he sometimes taught. His research also involved the use of Chinese and Japanese, making him one of a tiny handful of scholars in the United States at that time capable of using all the major languages of Buddhism. Following his retirement in 1996, Mas was working on a exploration of the structure of the Buddhist concept of nature in a cross-cultural, pan-Buddhist framework.

In 1986 Mas founded the Harvard Buddhist Studies Forum, which explores aspects of Buddhist thought, history, and culture through the work of scholars from around the world. He served as Director of the Forum until his retirement in 1996. The Buddhist Studies Forum continues to provide a vital center of intellectual inquiry and camaraderie at Harvard. Although he did not fulfill his plan as a young man to return to Japan to take over the family temple, he was active in the Buddhist Churches of America.

Mas died on June 3, 2000. He is survived by his wife Masumi (Mary), their three daughters Aki Elayne Nagatomi, Kiyoko Judith Nagatomi-Shimizu, and Aya Claire Nagatomi-Windle, all of California, three sisters, five grandchildren, two nephews, and one niece.

Respectfully submitted,

John Carman
Diana Eck
Robert Gimello
Helen Hardacre, Chair