

Obituary for U Tin Htway

U Tin Htway (17 September 1930 - 23 October 2015) Born in Monywa, Upper Burma, where his father ran one of Burma's first fixed-price shops, U Tin Htway and family moved to Rangoon in the mid-1930s and settled in Sanchaung, Rangoon's "Burmese village". After the war, he went to Rangoon University to read Burmese language and literature. With a BA in hand, he joined the Burma Translation Society as one of the editors of the Encyclopedia Birmanica, while also helping out with the family's printing business. An offer to work for the Burma Programme of the BBC World Services provided a welcome opportunity to leave Burma shortly after Ne Win's coup d'etat.

During the five years in London, U Tin Htway enrolled again at university to complete an M.Phil dissertation on Thakin Kodawhmaing's political writings, which he completed under the supervision of Prof U Hla Pe. Amidst preparations for his return to Burma, as the time at the BBC was nearing completion, he received an invitation by Manuel Sarkisyanz, the newly-appointed professor of South Asian Politics at the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University, to serve as a lecturer in Burmese. After two years, this initially temporary lectureship was turned into a permanent one on Prof Sarkisyanz's initiative, making U Tin Htway the scholar he never pretended to be. "The more I read the more I realize how little I know", he'd frequently say. However, this did not prevent him from closely cooperating with Prof Sarkisyanz, and moreover his position at the SAI brought him in contact again with his former saya-gyi Gordon Luce, under whom he had studied at Rangoon University. Luce had re-settled to Jersey Island after being forced to leave Burma, and throughout the 1970s U Tin Htway regularly visited Luce to study the history and epigraphy of Pagan.

Above anything else, it was the Burmese language - word roots, etymologies, compounds and changes of meaning - that interested U Tin Htway and continued to keep him busy even after retiring from university in 1995. He enjoyed reading classical literature and inscriptions over and over again, checking meanings, morphologies and lexemes (and occasionally loathing Burmese authors for their deliberate alterations and innovations), while keeping his notes and thoughts in an ever-growing collection of index cards. Unabatedly sharp-minded and full of ideas as ever, he began to mention more often than before that he felt increasingly feeble and tired since the beginning of this year. One week after his 85th birthday, he was admitted to hospital after suffering another fall, and despite receiving intensive care he did not recover, passing away peacefully on the 23rd of October.

Anicca vata sankhara, uppada-vaya-dhammino; Uppajjitva nirujjhanti, tesam vupasamo sukho'ti.



At the BBC (mid-1960s)



With G. H. Luce and M. Sarkisyanz, Jersey (1973)