This book represents the last contribution to Buddhist studies and to the intellectual histories of civilizations by Steven Collins (1951–2018). Steve had finished a complete first draft only a few months before his untimely death in February 2018 and had gone as far as to circulate the manuscript among a number of close colleagues and friends. Among those who would have first seen the complete draft was this book’s editor, Justin McDaniel, who had already started profusely commenting on the manuscript before it fell to him to facilitate its posthumous publication. Steve knew his manuscript needed revision, but he was already confident in thinking it would be generatively provocative, and also in announcing it as his last scholarly contribution. (Steve’s untimely death is all the more poignant given how greatly he was looking forward to a retirement spent reading novels and rereading Western philosophers, not to mention spending time with his grandchildren.)

A world-renowned scholar of the Pāli Buddhist traditions of South and Southeast Asia, Steven Collins was at the time of his death the Chester D. Tripp Professor in the Humanities in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations and in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, where he

PREFACE

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spent almost three decades of his influential career. As suggested by Charles Hallisey’s afterword to the present book, the distinctive scholarly contributions Steve made over the course of his career find their fullest expression in a triptych of books, of which this is the third. The first, rewritten from a 1979 Oxford doctoral thesis, was published by Cambridge University Press as *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* in 1982, almost a decade before Steve’s 1991 appointment at the University of Chicago. (Prior to coming to Chicago, he had taught at Indiana University and Concordia University.) Given the particular importance that *Selfless Persons* had for me, I am inclined to begin situating the present volume by saying a few words about Steve’s first book, and about the history of my acquaintance with its highly accomplished author.

*Selfless Persons* first came across my radar screen some ten years after its publication, at around the same time that Daniel Dennett’s *Consciousness Explained* was published (1991). For me, that was toward the end of a desultory and ultimately abortive stint as a graduate student at Columbia University, and my simultaneous discovery of these two books was galvanizing; taken together, they helped me realize that it was not history but *philosophy* that really interested me. I left Columbia and spent some five years working at Denver’s Tattered Cover Bookstore, where I had the mental space to do some significant intellectual retooling; an inordinate percentage of my pay went for books in Buddhist and modern Western philosophy. My early karmic connection with Steve’s work was maintained in those years by part-time work toward a master’s degree at the Iliff School of Theology, where I worked not only with José Cabézon (whom I knew from his teaching at Carleton College my junior year) but also with Paul Griffiths, who taught a course at Iliff during the summer of 1993. Paul, it turned out, had among his colleagues
at the University of Chicago none other than Steven Collins, and it was therefore natural that my intellectual retooling should unfold in tandem with the thought that I ought perhaps to study in the University of Chicago Divinity School’s program in Philosophy of Religions.

So when I came to scout Chicago’s program a year before my matriculation there in 1997, I was particularly eager to meet Steve, whose *Selfless Persons* had played so central a role in facilitating my recent process of intellectual discernment. I’ll never forget our first meeting. By then resolved to undertake doctoral studies in Buddhist philosophy, I was of course eager to talk about the philosophical aspects of *Selfless Persons* and how its august author might figure in my studies at Chicago; I was thus rather taken aback when, early in our interview, Steve emphatically disavowed any philosophical interests. *Selfless Persons*, he allowed, had some philosophical dimensions, but he said he had decided that studying Indian Buddhist philosophy was just too hard. Doing a good job of it, he said, required knowing the Brahmanical Mīmāṃsā school of thought backward and forward. It required knowing Nyāya backward and forward. It required knowing Vedānta backward and forward. As he continued thus enumerating Indian traditions of thought integral to the understanding of Buddhist philosophy, each emphatic repetition of the adverbial phrase seemed a lash that flayed my fledgling philosophical aspirations.

While I felt rather reduced by the experience, my first meeting with Steve was much redeemed by the fact that the eminent English scholar positively lit up when, in concluding our conversation, I admired the spiffy Miles Davis T-shirt he was sporting. In the many subsequent years of our relationship—especially 2004–2018, the years we were colleagues at the University of Chicago—I would come to know Steve well, and to understand
that his initially disheartening emphasis on how much work my proposed course of study demanded would not at all have been meant to dominate or intimidate me, or in any other way to exercise teacherly power. Steve’s emphatic enumeration of the requirements for doing a good job of studying Indian Buddhist philosophy reflected, rather, his own uncompromising rigor in pursuing intellectually serious questions, which he always approached with humility.

These, surely, were among the intellectual virtues evident to all who had the chance to experience Steve’s attentively engaged presence at lectures and seminars and the like, where he was almost invariably the one who asked the most incisive questions—questions that cut to the heart of the matter and brought sharply into focus for everyone present the intellectual stakes of whatever was at issue. Humility and incisiveness alike were evident in Steve’s uncommon willingness to allow, for example, that he just didn’t understand what someone was saying; as often as not, this brought into view that the speaker hadn’t really understood what he or she really meant, either.

Although I thus came to appreciate that it was mostly his own exacting standards that led Steve to disavow having any philosophical acumen, I have persisted in believing that he was, nevertheless, every bit a philosophical thinker. Steve’s work in the intellectual history of Theravâda civilizations invariably exhibits a rigorous concern for conceptual clarity and precision, and to identify something intellectually basic in connection with whatever is the topic. His work thus exemplifies not only intellectual history but also, more fundamentally, an interest in theorizing the ways something like civilizational knowledge circulates. This is evident in Steve’s own characterization (in 1982) of the project Selfless Persons: “my main interest,” he wrote then, “is philosophical.”
Selfless Persons was pitched largely as an intervention in philosophy—"contemporary," to be precise, and "particularly in the English-language tradition." The problem with philosophy, Steve thought, is that it "suffers from a lack of historical and social self-awareness," so Selfless Persons aimed to show that philosophy "should not proceed in abstraction from intellectual history and anthropology, from the investigation and comparison of cultures." From the beginning, one could say, Steve was concerned to make the understanding of civilizations somehow basic for the study of philosophy.

This is evident in the precise significance of the subtitle of Selfless Persons, which announces two analytic categories that it is the business of the book to theorize: imagery and thought in Theravāda Buddhism. Thought is here paradigmatically exemplified by the Abhidhamma literature’s scholastic systematization and analyses of all the many categories mentioned in teachings attributed to the Buddha. All these categories arguably relate, directly or indirectly, to the Buddhist tradition’s orienting claim, expressed in the title Selfless Persons—the “no-self doctrine” (anattavāda), which can be understood as the doctrine that persons are not individuated by anything worth the name “selves.” To the extent, then, that thought is epitomized by the Abhidhamma literature’s systematic exposition, we can say that “thought,” for Theravāda Buddhists, constitutively involves a synchronic conception of the selflessness of persons: a snapshot, as it were, of all the kinds of impersonal factors that can enter into the occurrence or description of any action or event—a snapshot, that is, of the truths discovered by the Buddha—considered in an instant.

As against Abhidhamma’s synchronic conception of the complete Buddhist account of the no-self doctrine, “imagery” here particularly means narrative imagery, and so mostly refers to
what all of Steve’s work really engages: texts—stories or plays derived from the Jātaka literature, for example, that dramatize and aestheticize the truths theorized in “thought,” variously narrating the difference it makes that persons do not have selves. It is thus a chief aim of *Selfless Persons* to theorize “thought” and “imagery” as conceptually distinct analytic categories—as Steve would later emphasize, as modes of discourse most significantly distinguished by their essentially different temporalities. Thus, while thought represents Buddhist doctrine as a timelessly complete system of mutually relating truths, imagery, as narrative, is constitutively diachronic in its relations—essentially concerned with the narrative sequence in which the narrated events make sense as the kinds of events they are.

In addition to presenting what is widely acknowledged as a definitive treatment of the no-self doctrine as understood in the world of Pāli Buddhism, *Selfless Persons* is thus animated by a concern to theorize these differing discursive modalities as both necessary for the circulation of “Theravāda Buddhism.” The latter here serves as an instance of civilizational knowledge, and it is a conceptually basic concern to theorize the chief unifying feature of the triptych now completed by the present book. The second of these—*Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)—eschews the 1982 book’s reference to philosophy, explicitly theorizing systematic and narrative modes of thought as both integral to civilizational thought worlds. Now the basic unit of analysis is akin to what some historians of the *Annales* school of thought refer to as mentalités: “mental outlooks as expressed in discourse and artifacts,” according to Steve’s own gloss of the concept, comprising all manner of things (fables, songs, statuary, philosophy, etiquette) that, as *Annales* historian Marc LeGoff emphasizes, “were not produced to serve as historical documents, but are a historical reality unto
themselves.”2 Adopting the comparable idea of an imaginaire (another term favored by Annales historians), Steve’s second book proposes an alternate conception of what he had earlier called “Theravāda Buddhism”; Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities are now to be understood, the book’s subtitle tells us, as “Utopias,” rather, of “the Pali Imaginaire.”

Considering an imaginaire as necessarily comprising both systematic and narrative modes of thought, Steve’s second book correlates the Abhidhamma literature’s synchronic conception of doctrine with the kind of closure and ultimate felicity thought to result from the ideal renunciant’s quest. Examining Nirvana (to quote the title of part I) “in and out of time,” Steve can then theorize narrative thought as essentially concerned somehow to resolve tensions between that ideal and the ongoing demands of life and society. By variously performing that dramatic conflict, narrative thought can at once valorize a Buddhist ideal and acknowledge the virtual impossibility of its achievement. According to Steve, such distinct representations of Nirvana and other Buddhist felicities are both integral to the Pāli imaginaire. The fact that the trope of nirvana is often narrated in ways seemingly at odds with the tradition’s systematic conceptions of it can be understood not as a contradiction to be explained, but rather as reflecting the many and various ways in which an idea central to the whole Pali imaginaire is (to be sure) theorized therein, but also reckoned with—performed, wondered at, venerated, exalted, exemplified, etc.

Here in Wisdom as a Way of Life, the basic distinction between systematic and narrative thought remains central. Narrative thought is theorized not only as involving a temporality distinct from that of synchronic conceptions of doctrine but also as necessarily involving what narrative theorists call “actants”—any of various narrative roles or functions that might be filled by one
or more characters or other entities in a story. (The enumeration of a narrative event’s actants might be thought analogous to the Sanskrit grammatical tradition’s enumeration of kārakas, which are proposed as indicating all the ways any number of nouns can be related to a verb; actants, like kārakas, might thus be taken as variously denoting things like the agents, means, and locations of actions.) The generative tension that Steve sees at the heart of the Pāli imaginaire can thus be expressed in terms of the fact that according to the ultimate truth (paramattha sacca) as systematically theorized in Buddhist traditions, there are no real actants—but insofar as actants must nonetheless figure in any story of Buddhist achievements, an intractable tension between systematic and narrative conceptions of the tradition’s ideals is, inexorably, integral.

In addition, the present book introduces new conceptual tools that had figured prominently in Steve’s thought and conversations over the last decade or so. By the untimely end of his life, Steve had for many years been interested in what he calls “practices of the self,” an idea informed by Michel Foucault’s theorization of “technologies of the self” and by Pierre Hadot on philosophy as “a way of life.” Consistently with the overarching concerns of the first two books in his triptych, Steve had become interested in the difference it makes to appreciate that the traditionally disciplined study of Buddhist philosophy was itself a practice, ultimately aimed at fundamentally transforming the practitioners thereof. Insofar as the ideal subjects of Theravāda Buddhist practice thus aim to constitute themselves as particular kinds of persons, the tradition’s systematic conceptions of ultimate truth are never fully intelligible apart from narrations of the renunciant lifestyle that structures the whole tradition.

Among Steve’s thoughts, surely, was not only that the Pāli Buddhist imaginaire thus readily admits of analysis in terms
suggested by Foucault and Hadot but also that attention to the Pāli imaginaire’s own presentations of its practices of the self might enrich other analyses deriving from Foucault and Hadot. Toward that end, Steve had for several years been planning to co-teach a seminar on practices of the self with two University of Chicago colleagues uniquely qualified to join him in this: Arnold Davidson, who has for years been lecturing to full houses on Foucault’s *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (not to mention having edited and introduced Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*), and Margaret Mitchell, a scholar of the New Testament and early Christianity interested in the cenobitic communities of third- and fourth-century Egypt. Unfortunately, the seminar Steve and his colleagues envisaged will never be taught, at least not with Steve’s involvement.

It is fortunate that Steve had before his death completed a manuscript of what he already took to be his last contribution to scholarship. The present book represents an edition of that work by Justin McDaniel, whose editor’s introduction explains the kinds of judgments that remained to be made about the manuscript, as well as other aspects of his approach to the project. Justin was long a favorite interlocutor of Steve’s, and his own work on Theravāda traditions of Thailand gives him a unique perspective on the agenda and presuppositions of this book, his edition of which was a labor of love that is worthy of thanks and praise. Justin consulted with Steve’s wife, Claude Grangier, who had read Steve’s manuscript and discussed it with him much. Publication of this book could not, of course, have gone forward without Claude’s blessing, and she is to be thanked for her commitment to seeing the project through to the end. Thanks are due, as well, to Charles Hallisey, whose friendship Steve long appreciated for (among other things) all the ways it challenged him to clarify his thinking; Charlie’s afterword is an invaluable
guide to reading this book as consistent with the two major books that preceded it.

That *Wisdom as a Way of Life* exists, then, is thanks to the efforts and good will of all three of these people, who were in various ways among those dearest to Steve. Thanks are due, as well, to Columbia University Press’s Wendy Lochner, who was enthusiastic about this book from the time she first read Steve’s manuscript. Given the outstanding list of titles in Buddhist studies that Wendy has seen to publication over the years, it is fitting that Steven Collins’s last contribution to the field should be published with the imprimatur of her editorial judgment. To invoke a gesture typical not of Theravāda but of Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions, it would be a good thing for a world badly in need of it if all the merit accrued in bringing this book to publication were dedicated to the welfare of all sentient beings.