

Peter Gregory, Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies and Religion (1945–2025)
Smith College, Memorial Event, November 5, 2025

Written and ready by Andy Rotman, Jill Ker Conway Professor of Religion

Peter Gregory joined the faculty at Smith College in 1999, and for the next 15 years he helped helm the departments of Religion and East Asian Studies while also teaching popular courses on a range of topics relating to Buddhism. These courses included *Buddhist Thought*, *Buddhist Meditation*, *Zen in China and Japan*, *Buddhism in America*, and *Buddhism, the Beats, and the Making of the Counterculture*. Peter was renowned as an embodiment of both wisdom and compassion, Buddhism's two lodestars, so it's no surprise that a day-long conference in his honor will be held at Harvard University next month featuring some 30 scholars. The title of the conference, "Illuminations from a Bright Mirror: Peter Gregory as Scholar, Editor, and Mentor in the Study of Chinese Buddhism" makes a fitting epitaph, although Peter was equally brilliant as a teacher, as his many students at Smith would attest.

Peter was truly a scholar's scholar. He was a specialist on Chinese Buddhism during the Tang and Song periods, and acclaimed for his groundbreaking work on the Chan and Huayan figure Guifeng Zongmi. This focus led to two books, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism*, published in 1991, and *Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity: An Annotated Translation of Tsung-mi's Yüan jen lun with a Modern Commentary*, published in 1995. For Peter, making sense of Zongmi was a lifelong project. At the time of his death, he was working on a massive multi-volume, copiously annotated translation of Zongmi's magnum opus, the *Chan Preface*, with an extensive scholarly commentary. Peter's work was invariably meticulous, so it's no surprise that this draft reads like final copy, making it easy for friends in the scholarly community to ready his project for publication, which they are now doing. It's a mark of Peter's scholarly acumen that his books continue to be authoritative not just in content but in style. One colleague told me that he didn't use the *Chicago Manual of Style* to answer his stylistic questions, he simply referred to one of Peter's books.

In addition to his authored volumes, Peter was also a masterful editor of multiauthor volumes. Most of these derived from conferences he sponsored through the Kuroda Institute for the Study of Buddhism, of which he was executive director and president from 1984 to 2014. Among these volumes were *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, published in 1987, and *Buddhism in the Sung*, published in 1999. Peter was an exacting editor, making sure contributors engaged with one another's work with precision, polish, and panache, and writing extensive introductions that became, like his other books, standard references in the field.

Peter's scholarly interests also extended to Buddhism in America, allowing him to study and reflect on the field he was helping to create. This interest culminated in the documentary film from 2004 *The Gate of Sweet Nectar: Feeding Hungry Ghosts in an American Zen Community*, created with Lesley Jo Weaver, at the time a Smith student and now a professor of medical anthropology and global health at the University of Oregon, and the coedited volume from 2007 *Women Practicing Buddhism: American Experiences*, which arose from a conference at Smith that brought together students, scholars, teachers, practitioners, artists, activists, and healers to explore the diverse experiences of women practicing Buddhism in America.

Peter's interest in Buddhism in America was also deeply personal. In many ways it started in 1968 when Peter began working at the New Jersey Neuro-Psychiatric Institute at Princeton University, where Peter had recently been an undergraduate. Research funding for psychedelics had dried up, and Humphrey Osmond—inventor of the word “psychedelic” and pioneering researcher on the effects of LSD and mescaline—came up with the idea of doing research on hypnotic alternations of perception. Enter Peter. For nearly two years, Peter worked as a hypnotist and his hypnotic subject was Harold (Hal) Roth, now professor of Religious Studies and East Asian Studies and director of the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University, whose stories about this time are trippy indeed. The young researchers were part of a burgeoning counter-culture movement trying to open the proverbial “doors of perception,” and they came to realize that true fulfillment in life required a profound exploration of one's inner life. Collectively they explored alternate ways of expanding the mind, engaging in many non-traditional spiritual practices, including Zen meditation.

Peter eventually went to Los Angeles to continue his practice of Zen with Maezumi Roshi and the Los Angeles Zen Center, becoming a serious Buddhist practitioner and a committed meditator, tai chi enthusiast, and community builder. Peter's deep practice manifested itself in many ways, but the one that his students at Smith most often commented upon was his steadfast listening. Peter told me that meetings were an opportunity for Buddhist practice. He would focus all his energy on listening. He would, he said, imagine himself as a giant ear. And students, experiencing someone REALLY listening to them, would open up. Faculty would, too, and I was one of them.

In 2006 I was being actively recruited for a job at the University of Pennsylvania, and I really wasn't sure how to respond. So, I did what I always did at the time when I faced a major life decision: I spoke with Peter. Peter was the chair of my department, but that's not why I spoke with him. I spoke with Peter because I trusted him fully. He really listened, and he offered sage advice. Peter and I went for a long walk around campus, and together we decided that I should apply for the position at Penn. The next day I described all this to a senior colleague at another institution, and he laughed heartily and said, “You're not going to leave Smith.” I was incredulous, but then he went on to explain, if you're that close to your chair, then you're in a really functional department, and departments like that are rare and only to be abandoned under extreme duress. He was prescient. I did apply to Penn and I did get the job, but I chose to stay here at Smith because there was Peter and people like him. People who listened, people who cared.

Peter retired from Smith in 2014, and he and his beloved wife Margi moved to Starksboro, Vermont, where he could write, work the land, and restore their old farmhouse, and the two of them could build community. Especially exciting were visits from his two daughters and their spouses, Jyana and Earl Browne and Tara and Steph Gregory, and his granddaughter, Sophie. Peter had been happy and healthy until his passing on March 19, 2025. That day was a really good one. He did Tai Chi in the morning, spent some time outdoors, worked on his book, enjoyed a family dinner, watched television with them, and then went to bed with a novel. He died peacefully in his sleep. May his memory be a blessing.

-Andy Rotman, Jill Ker Conway Professor of Religion (Peter's former chair), Smith College
My thanks to Margi Gregory, Hal Roth, T. Griffith Foulk, and Robert Buswell for their help with my remarks.