

Herbert Guenther: Striving for Insight and Understanding

Ilse Guenther

*Ilse Guenther,
Ph.D.*

Herbert Guenther was born on March 17, 1917 in Bremen, Germany, as the only son of the sculptor Reinhold Guenther and his wife Dorothea. Right from the beginning, the little boy was delicate and often indisposed, but mentally very alert and bright. As a small child he loved going to the museum, especially to the section devoted to Far Eastern art work and displays of articles from India, China, Japan and Southeast Asia. He learned to read early and again he preferred books with Chinese, Indian or Arabic stories and spent every penny of his pocket money to get any books on Far Eastern topics. Very early he also had an unusual ability to learn foreign languages; when he was nine years old, he began learning Chinese from a Chinese exchange student who happened to be in Bremen and soon he was able to read any Chinese book he could get hold of. Two years later a school professor gave him a Sanskrit grammar and some Sanskrit books that he still had at home, but warned the boy that he could not give him any instructions because he himself had completely forgotten what he had learned long ago. Herbert studied the books eagerly, fascinated by the contents, and used all his spare time to learn and study both Sanskrit and Chinese so well that by the time he went to University he not only read both languages fluently, but he had already written several scholarly papers on Indian philosophy and translated quite a few Chinese stories, ready for publication. He was just as successful with the languages taught in school—English, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Meanwhile he had learned by himself Persian and Arabic, because he was fascinated by some literary works in these languages; and he was able to read, write and speak

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*Canadian Journal of
Buddhist Studies,
Number Two, 2006*

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Buddhist studies

Swedish, French, Spanish and Russian fluently. In other subjects, for example mathematics, he was less gifted: his school friends often helped him with mathematical problems, while they invariably needed his help with translations of Latin, Greek or Hebrew passages. And he never took part in sports because he was too weak.

After graduating from school (Gymnasium) in 1936 he went to Munich University to study, specializing in Indian and Iranian Studies taught by Professor Walter Wuest, a well-known scholar of Indo-germanic Languages; since Herbert knew Sanskrit and Pali so well, he was permitted to take up also Pali, Prakrit and Sinhalese which he studied under Professor Whilhem Geiger. While he always enjoyed his Pali and Sinhalese studies, he found Vedic studies under Professor Wuest less inspiring; the professor would talk about each word and explain in detail from which root it was derived. But Herbert once had the courage to ask, "This is all very interesting, but what does this Vedic verse mean?" That was a question the professor had not expected, but he did realize that it was a relevant question for his student and treated him with some respect.

By 1939 Herbert had received his Ph.D. and continued to do postgraduate work. That was the time when we first met. I had been sent by my professor in Vienna to study in Munich for one term; I stayed in the house of my uncle and aunt who were both very good musicians. Herbert was eager to meet them, bring his flute and play some music with them. After the first evening my parents asked my uncle what was his impression of the young man. "Well, I can't say anything about his character, but he does play the flute exceptionally well" was the answer, and with that he was more or less accepted in our family. When I returned to Vienna, we remained in contact and two years later Herbert transferred to Vienna to take part in Seminars and prepare for his second doctorate (Dr. Phil. Habil.), which he obtained in 1943. In spite of the oppressive situation of the whole country we decided to get married in 1944 after I had obtained my Ph.D.; the Nazis were in power, nobody could do anything against them and it seemed hopeless to wait for better times.

Herbert was now teaching at Vienna University and I taught at a high school until 1950 when we decided to go to India for further research work. We both realized that this was essential for him in order to fully understand the spiritual land's philosophical values hidden in the Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan texts (he had meanwhile studied Tibetan, too) which he loved to read and study. And although life in India was rather difficult for us, the opportunities to study and do research work were extremely valuable. At first Herbert taught Russian at Lucknow University, but he also came in contact with many scholars and pandits. Almost every day he went to the house of professor Surendranath

Dasgupta (the author of the excellent work *A History of Indian Philosophy*) to read out and recite Sanskrit texts for the professor (who was half blind at that time, but wanted to finish his last book), take notes and help him in every way he could. He also worked together with Acharya Narendra Deo and his friend Pandit Jaganath Upadhyay to bring out a clear analysis of Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosha*. Many times we went to Benares and Sarnath for a visit and for most valuable meetings and discussions with outstanding scholars and pandits. For many summer holidays we traveled to Manali, crossed the Rothang pass to stay in Lahoul, visiting many Tibetan monasteries to study and copy out many rare Tibetan texts.

In 1958 the Government Sanskrit College in Benares was transformed into the Sanskrit University (Varanaseya Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya) and Herbert was invited to teach there as professor for Buddhist studies. At that time many Tibetan Lamas had fled from Tibet and lived as refugees in various places in India. With the help of the Indian government five very learned Lamas were installed as research fellows at the Sanskrit University and about thirty very good young lamas were allowed to study Sanskrit and assist in the research. All of them did excellent work that was internationally recognized.

Finally, in 1963, we had to leave India. My husband had been invited to come to Saskatoon to become professor and head of the Department of Far Eastern Studies. In many ways life was much easier here. We had more time for writing books and articles; he also had the opportunity to go to many conferences, give lectures and courses in various places (for one term he taught at Yale University). Our two daughters had the opportunity to study and we enjoyed playing music at home and at the Musical Arts Club and going to concerts. But his main interest here, too, was writing, studying the original texts, all the time striving to understand what the texts wanted to say and to present this in his books.

*Please visit our website, www.nalandacollege.ca,
for a complete Bibliography of Prof. Guenther's works,
made up of ... books and ... articles, in German and English.*