Obituary: Elliot M. Stern

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Dr. Elliot M. Stern passed away on July 30, 2026, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States, where he had lived with his family for most of his life. A Sanskritist with a lifelong interest in the history and literature of Indian philosophy in Sanskrit, Stern made invaluable contributions to the field, particularly to Mīmāṃsā studies. While his career path led him to find gainful employment outside academia, he remained engaged in research in his field of expertise and collaborated with scholars around the world, including in Vienna. The world of Indology has lost an insightful scholar, a meticulous reader of rare Sanskrit texts, and a generous advisor.

Stern was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1948, the son of Sydney Stanley Stern and Sonya Stern, née Cohen. After attending local schools, he enrolled at Columbia University, where he developed an interest in Buddhism, initially focusing on Chinese. His interests later shifted to Indian philosophy and Sanskrit, which would then shape his entire academic career. After completing his BA in 1969, Stern worked at the Columbia University Bookstore for three years before beginning graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in 1972, under the supervision of George Cardona and Wilhelm Halbfass, while also studying with Ludo Rocher, among others. It was there that he met Ernst Steinkellner, who taught Indian philosophy at the university from 1971 to 1973 before returning to Vienna to found the Institut für Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde at the University of Vienna. Their first meeting in 1972 marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship that endured until Stern's death.

In 1974–1975, Stern was a teaching fellow in Sanskrit at the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Oriental Studies. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he travelled extensively in India to study Sanskrit literature and locate and study manuscripts in the area of Indian philosophy. He made three such journeys before completing his PhD, each marked by numerous adventures and discoveries. His first journey took him to Madurai in South India, where he obtained a diploma in Tamil (1977). From 1977 to 1979, he spent his second period in India at Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, where he was affiliated with the Department of Philosophy. There he studied with two prominent South Indian Mīmāṃsā paṇḍits, P. N. Paṭṭābhirāma Śāstrī and A. Cinnasvāmi Śāstrī, whose scholarly lineage is still today among the most significant in the traditional study of Mīmāṃsā in both northern and southern India. Under their guidance, he read two texts that became central to his doctoral research: Maṇḍana Miśra's *Vidhiviveka* and Vācaspati Miśra's commentary thereon, the *Nyāyakaṇikā*. He also studied Āpadeva's *Mīmāṃsānyāyaprakāśa*. Stern was one of the very few scholars outside India, if not the

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only one, to have inherited this scholarly tradition. He later passed on this knowledge to a younger generation of Mīmāṃsā scholars around the world.

With support from the Fulbright Program, Stern undertook further scholarly travels in 1981–1982, beginning with a month in Vienna in December 1981. His third journey to India began in January 1982 and took him first to Delhi, from where he travelled by train to Kolkata and began looking for manuscripts relevant to his scholarly interests. He journeyed extensively across India, from north to south and east to west, visiting places in Bihar and Rajasthan, along with Ahmedabad, Mysore, and Madras, and even reaching Kathmandu in Nepal. He went to Bihar hoping to locate a manuscript of the *Nyāyakaṇikā*. Although he had to wait several days for a gatekeeper to unlock the manuscript library, he did not give up. At the Rajasthan Oriental Research Institute in Jodhpur, he obtained inter alia a copy of the *Nyāyasūtroddhāra*. And in Mysore, he was able to examine a unique manuscript of Vyomaśiva's *Padārthasaṅgrahaṭīkā*, widely known as the *Vyomavatī*, a text that subsequently became the focus of a separate editorial project (see below and Stern 2007). He was also officially affiliated with the Department of Philosophy at Jadavpur University in Kolkata in 1982. Stern's collection of microfilms and photocopies of Indian manuscripts remains an essential resource for Mīmāṃsā scholars and scholars of other philosophical traditions of India. He generously shared his collection with close colleagues and, in the final years of his life, endeavored to convert it into a more accessible form.

After his travels in India and Nepal, Stern continued to Germany, where he spent several months at the University of Marburg as a guest of Wilhelm Rau. In October 1982, he visited the Seminar für Kultur und Geschichte Indiens at the University of Hamburg, where he met Albrecht Wezler and Lambert Schmithausen, among others, and began lifelong friendships with Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz. In January 1985, he returned to Vienna for a three-month stay to work with Gerhard Oberhammer on the latter's dictionary project on Indian epistemology and logic, later published in three volumes under the title *Terminologie der frühen philosophischen Scholastik in Indien: Begriffswörterbuch zur altindischen Dialektik, Erkenntnislehre und Methodologie* (1991–2006, edited by Gerhard Oberhammer, Ernst Prets, and Joachim Prandstetter).

On July 12, 1985, Stern married Karen Christine Hibbard ("Chris"). Their son, William Kalyan Hibbard Stern, was born on October 5, 1985. Their daughter, Rebecca Madhavi Hibbard Stern, was born on May 5, 1987.

In 1988, Stern received his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania with a critical edition of the first half of Maṇḍana's *Vidhiviveka,* together with the *Nyāyakaṇikā* by Vācaspati Miśra I and two subcommentaries by the fourteenth-century Kerala scholar Parameśvara I. The result was a monumental work comprising more than 1,750 pages of Sanskrit text, all written by hand in Stern's remarkably clear Devanagari script. For decades thereafter (indeed, until Stern began circulating preliminary copies of what would become Stern 2023), Stern's doctoral dissertation remained an indispensable resource for scholars of Maṇḍana working on these texts.

After holding temporary positions as a postdoctoral researcher in 1991 and a research associate in 1993–1994, Stern joined the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), a US federal government agency, in 1999. Based in Philadelphia, he worked at the IRS until his retirement at the end of 2023, all the while actively pursuing his research as an independent scholar. One of his friends and fellow Indologists, Frederick Smith, observed that his work at the IRS suited him: "This was in many ways a perfect job for him because of his propensity to master complexity and his fastidiousness in understanding esoteric detail." Despite the demands of his professional career, Stern continued to work on his magnum opus, the critical edition of the *Vidhiviveka* and its commentary and subcommentaries, refining the first part

of the text – the so-called *pūrvapakṣa* – and completing the second, which presents Maṇḍana's own position on the subject of injunction (*vidhi*). In an era when many scholars focus primarily on short-term projects, Stern had the perseverance to pursue this undertaking for some fifty years. His wife, Chris Hibbard, affectionately recalled that the *Vidhiviveka* was his "lover": he worked on it over breakfast, after work, and on weekends. She also recounted that he continued examining manuscript variants until days before his death.

Stern maintained an active scholarly exchange with fellow Indologists, particularly specialists in Mīmāṃsā, with whom he corresponded extensively by email. He was an active participant on the Indology mailing list from 1997 onwards, generously sharing insights and resources. In 2003, Kei Kataoka spent time in Philadelphia, where Stern was teaching introductory Sanskrit at the University of Pennsylvania (as he would again in 2020–2021). During his stay, Kataoka conducted reading sessions on the Codanāsūtra section of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa's *Ślokavārttika*, to which Stern made substantial contributions. These sessions eventually bore fruit in one of the most important works in the field of Mīmāṃsā: Kataoka's *Kumārila on Truth, Omniscience, and Killing*, published in 2011 by the Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, Vienna.

Alongside his decades-long work on the *Vidhiviveka*, Stern also began a second editorial project devoted to Vyomaśiva's *Padārthasaṅgrahaṭīkā*, a commentary on Praśastapāda's *Padārthadharmasaṅgraha*, using the fourteenth-century manuscript he had examined in Mysore in 1982. This project was first announced in Stern 2007.

In 2023, Stern finally brought his work on the *Vidhiviveka* to fruition with the publication of the magnificent two-volume edition *Vidhiviveka of Maṇḍanamiśra with its commentary Nyāyakaṇikā of Vācaspatimiśra and its commentaries Juṣadhvaṅkaraṇī and Svaditaṅkaraṇī of Parameśvara*, volume 155 in the Collection Indologie series jointly published by the Institut français de Pondichéry and the École française d'Extrême-Orient. The importance of this work cannot be overestimated. Parameśvara's subcommentaries had never been published before. The *Vidhiviveka* and the *Nyāyakaṇikā* had been available in print since the late nineteenth century, but existing editions were so unreliable that even experienced Indian paṇḍits often gave up trying to understand them. Stern's critical edition transformed this situation. Its extensive critical apparatus, documenting variant readings and other textual witnesses, opened up new avenues of research within Mīmāṃsā studies. Stern also divided the text into logically coherent chapters and sections, clarifying its structure and making it considerably more accessible. This edition thus marks a true turning point in the study of Maṇḍana's *Vidhiviveka*, a central but largely forgotten masterpiece of Indian philosophy.[2] Stern continued to revise the edition and make corrections until shortly before publication, and even after its appearance he circulated lists of addenda and corrigenda to a work many of us would have considered flawless. Stern's edition thus constitutes perhaps the most accomplished twenty-first-century work of textual criticism devoted to an Indian philosophical text, and will likely remain so for many years to come.

From 2019 onwards, Stern showed a growing interest in supporting younger scholars and collaborating with colleagues in person, rather than through the email exchanges that had characterized his scholarly interactions until then. In this context, he began participating in academic workshops, starting with an international workshop held in Vienna (July 3–10, 2019) entitled "Duties and Reasons: The *Vidhiviveka* by Maṇḍana Miśra with its commentary *Nyāyakaṇikā* by Vācaspati

[2] See Saito 2026 for a detailed review of the edition.

Miśra and subcommentary," organized by Elisa Freschi at the Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia (IKGA). The workshop was intended primarily to produce a translation of selected passages from the *Vidhiviveka* and to encourage Stern to complete his edition. It also provided many Mīmāṃsā scholars with a first opportunity to meet Elliot in person. Later that year, Stern also participated in the international workshop "Words, Concepts, Perceptions: Indian Buddhist epistemology and its context," held in Procida, Italy (September 3–7, 2019) and organized by the IKGA in collaboration with the Università di Napoli "L'Orientale." Participation in these workshops marked a departure from his predominantly solitary research and the beginning of increased involvement in international scholarly gatherings. His collaboration with Freschi continued after the Vienna workshop, culminating in the forthcoming edited volume *A Philosophy of Commands: On Maṇḍana Miśra's Vidhiviveka*, which includes a translation of the central chapter of the *Vidhiviveka* co-authored by Freschi and Stern, alongside several essays by other scholars explaining its philosophical significance. The volume is scheduled for publication in 2027 by Oxford University Press.

Following the initial *Vidhiviveka* workshop in 2019, Stern, Freschi, and several participants continued their collaborative reading of the text in weekly online sessions, which lasted until July 2026, just weeks before Stern's death. They also held three further workshops, in May and December 2023 and December 2025, to complete their reading of the second half of the text.

Another way in which Stern contributed to the international network of scholars of Sanskrit philosophy was through the annual Kumārila conferences organized since 2024 by Freschi and Nilanjan Das at the University of Toronto. These conferences are devoted to Kumārila's philosophical contributions and feature papers by early-career scholars alongside extended reading sessions led by experts in the field. Stern participated in the 2024 conference, leading a reading session on Kumārila's least-studied work, the *Ṭupṭīkā*, which has never been critically edited or translated. He focused on the section dealing with fixed-interval and occasional rituals (*Ṭupṭīkā* 6.3.2). His annotated translation of this section will appear in the forthcoming volume *Kumārila Bhaṭṭa: Philosophical Works* (Oxford University Press), edited by Freschi and Das.

Beginning in 2022, Stern collaborated with Akane Saito and Hugo David on a joint study of what may have been Maṇḍana Miśra's first work, the *Bhāvanāviveka*. As part of this collaboration, Stern undertook the preparation of a critical edition of Umbeka Bhaṭṭa's *Bhāvanāvivekaṭīkā*, the earliest known commentary on the *Bhāvanāviveka*. In mid-September 2024, Stern began a month-long stay as a Visiting Fellow at the IKGA, during which he worked closely with Saito and David on this project. On 23 September 2024, Stern gave a lecture at the Institute entitled "A *Vibhramavivekavṛtti* Fragment in Manuscripts of *Bhāvanāvivekaṭīkā*." In this lecture, he proposed that a fragment preserved in manuscripts of the *Bhāvanāvivekaṭīkā* might belong to an otherwise unknown autocommentary by Maṇḍana on his *Vibhramaviveka*. He explained how he had distinguished the fragment from Umbeka's text, analyzed its content and possible connection to the *Vibhramaviveka*, and presented his hypothesis about how it had become incorporated into the *Bhāvanāvivekaṭīkā*. This was a significant scholarly proposal, since the existence of such an autocommentary could fundamentally change our understanding of the text, one of the most difficult of Maṇḍana's works to study because of the extremely poor state of its manuscript transmission and the absence of commentaries. The substance of this lecture will be published in a forthcoming volume on the *Bhāvanāviveka* by Saito. During the same visit, Stern also donated the surrogates of manuscripts he had collected and technically improved upon over the years to the IKGA.

Stern's approach to textual criticism was grounded in a profound engagement with the texts he edited. His prodigious memory enabled him to identify the passages referred to by expressions such as "as it has been said" and "I will say later" throughout these lengthy texts. Combined with his extensive

reading of Sanskrit literature, it also enabled him to draw on parallel passages and instances of textual reuse in reconstructing the texts he edited (it is worth recalling that he did so at a time when electronically searchable texts were not yet available and such testimonia had to be identified individually on the basis of actual careful reading of the relevant sources). His critical editions also rested on a thorough understanding of the texts themselves, and to this end he prepared detailed translations, although most of these remained unpublished.

Stern's death came at the end of a long illness, which he faced with remarkable courage. Throughout his illness, he remained focused on how much time he had left to contribute to scholarship. Rather than dwelling on his circumstances, he considered with characteristic clarity which projects he might still be able to complete. He continued working on the *Vidhiviveka*, constantly improving his edition, while also embarking on new projects and generously supporting younger scholars. When news of his death became known, a striking number of scholars expressed their grief, sharing stories of the support he had given them. Many were young scholars who had rarely, if ever, met Stern in person, but who regarded him as a role model because of his dedication to scholarship even outside a conventional academic career. We will all fondly remember his kindness and patience in answering even the most naïve questions, his delightful sense of humor, and his unwavering love of Sanskrit for its own sake.

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