



ISSN 1076-9005  
Volume 4 1997: 301-305  
Publication date: 30 September 1997

*Identity and Experience. The Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism.* By Sue Hamilton. London: Luzac Oriental, 1996. Pp. xxxi, 218. ISBN 1-898942-10-2, £40.

*Reviewed by*

Damien Keown

*Department of Historical & Cultural Studies  
Goldsmiths College, University of London  
Email: d.keown@gold.ac.uk*

© 1997 Damien Keown

*Copyright Notice*

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the editors. All enquiries to [jbe-ed@psu.edu](mailto:jbe-ed@psu.edu).

Richard Gombrich concludes his Foreword to this volume with the comment “This book is a breakthrough in our understanding of the earliest Buddhism and offers a firm foundation for future research.” I see no reason to disagree with this opinion, and this book is likely to be much cited in future years both for its content and as an example of a methodology for how to research canonical Pali sources. The focus of the book, a slightly revised version of the author’s Oxford DPhil thesis, is clearly signalled in the subtitle and formulated as an interrogative in the Introduction: “What, indeed, *is* a human being according to the Buddha’s teaching?” (p.xvi). Rather than focusing on the *anattā* doctrine, which tells us what a human being is not, the discussion revolves around three central doctrines—the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, and the Five Aggregates—which explain how the individual functions and comes to be.

The early teachings on the Five Aggregates loom large throughout the volume. The structure adopted is to examine what the texts tell us about each of the five aggregates in turn with one chapter devoted to each. In addition there are three additional chapters on *Nāmarūpa* (Chapter 6), *Manomaya* (Chapter 7), and “The Attitude towards the Body” (Chapter 8). The texts examined are the four main *Nikāyas*, with occasional sideways glances at the *Abhidhamma* and *Visuddhimagga*, mainly to draw contrasts between the early material itself and later interpretations.

The focus of Chapter One is the *rūpakkhanda*, and one of the first problems to be taken up is how to classify the senses. These are listed neither as part of the *rūpakkhanda* nor as part of the four *arūpakkhandas*. Rejecting the view of the later tradition and of some modern scholars that the senses are the physical basis of the corresponding mental activities classified in the *arūpakkhandas*, an alternative is offered in terms of which the senses are neither *rūpa* nor *arūpa* but to be understood as “the faculties of vision, hearing, smell and so on” (p.18). Thus terms like *cakkhu*, *sota*, *ghāna*, and so forth “are to be understood figuratively as the potential for vision, hearing, smelling and so on, rather than being *merely* the physical sense organs” (p.20). The senses are “potentialities which determine the nature of each of the types of an individual’s psychological processes” and make use of a physical sense organ and also involve consciousness. They thus stand midway between the mental and physical domains, which is why the metaphor of the senses as “doors” is so common in the sources. This solution seems persuasive, and is an example of how here and elsewhere in the book a process of careful sifting and reflection leads to new insights into the understanding of terminology and concepts which have become fossilized both in the tradition and the minds of scholars. The chapter concludes with an examination of the terms *manodhātu*, *manas*, and *dhamma*

and the useful reminder that the scheme of the five aggregates is not meant to be an exhaustive classification of the human being: rather “It describes the *rūpa* and *arūpa* aspects of the way an individual manifests which, when understood, illustrates the inappropriateness of thinking in terms of separate selfhood” (p.35).

The chapters on the immaterial aggregates are much shorter (with the exception of the last on *viññāṇa*). Chapter Two explores the meaning of *vedanā* and *phassa* while Chapter Three examines the process of perception (*saññā*). In terms of the latter it is recognized correctly that it denotes both perceptual and conceptual processes. As the author concludes, “From all of the foregoing, it seems likely that the *saññākhandha* represents the processes of apperceiving and conceptualising, where apperceiving refers to the identificatory process that takes place on receiving incoming sensory data and conceptualising refers to the process of bringing to mind any abstract images, conceptions, ideas and so on which are not contemporaneous with incoming sensory data” (p.62).

Chapter Four deals with the difficult term *saṃkhāra* and elucidates its meaning by seeing how it functions in three different contexts: the *tilakkhaṇa* formula (*sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā*), the second link in the *paṭiccasamupāda*, and as the *saṃkhārakkhandha* itself. The first emphasizes that everything in *samsāra* is conditioned and dependent. With regard to the second a useful preliminary distinction is drawn between the general *doctrine* of dependent origination and the particular *formulas* (such as the twelvefold chain) which apply it in particular contexts. The formulas provide “a synthetical formula which explains the mechanics of how a human being *is* a human being” (p.68) or how selfless phenomena hang together to form coherent wholes. Specifically, *saṃkhāras* are the “individualising faculty” or the “formative principle” (p.70) which distinguishes one individual from another. The third context, the *saṃkhārakkhandha*, by contrast is analytic and impersonal and relates to the “volitional constituent” of the human being. It shows how the “will” determines the nature of individual existence in *samsāra*.

In this chapter, discussion of the fourth *khandha* itself receives only around two pages, which seems rather brief for a topic of such centrality to a book on the nature of the human being. Furthermore, the use of the term “will” in this context is problematic. This is a complex term in Western philosophical psychology and has many theological and other nuances which need to be distinguished. It could be argued, for example, and I for one would agree, that Buddhism has no concept of the “will” at all, certainly not understood in the Augustinian sense as a spiritual faculty independent of sensuous and intellectual life. A final point on which I remain unpersuaded

is the claim that “The *saṃkhārakkhandha* is unique among the *khandhas* in that it need not, and indeed ultimately should not, be ‘activated’ in the functioning of a human being” (p.71). The suggestion is that a human being (paradigmatically an Arhat) can (and does) function without the involvement of this aggregate, and experiences feelings without any concomitant volitions. One point which casts doubt on this is that *Theragāthā* 90 suggests that in the case of the Arhat all five aggregates remain: “The five aggregates being well understood continue to remain although their roots are cut off.” Another is that the enlightened (such as the Buddha) experience emotions (such as compassion) which seem to trigger off volitional actions (like teaching the Dharma).

The lengthier chapter on the fifth aggregate carefully explores the meaning of *viññāṇa* from a range of perspectives. *Viññāṇa* as impermanent, as “consciousness of”, as a factor in cognition, as providing continuity of experience, as evolving, and in relation to *kāya*. The chapter also includes a discussion of the related terms *manas* and *citta*. *Manas* is “thinking” or what one does with the mind, and is closely linked to volition (perhaps “deliberation” would be a good translation in this context). *Citta* refers centrally to one’s “state of mind” and has the subsidiary sense of “a thought”. The reference to the “brightly shining” mind at *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I.10 is not to be understood in a substantive sense but in an abstract one whereby “*citta* might in principle be thought of as pure” (p.113).

The final three chapters, which are not devoted to individual *khandhas*, contain among other things a good deal of material which helps clarify many ambiguous points in terms of the relationship between psychology and cosmology in early Buddhism. It is correctly concluded that the relationship between mind and body is not appropriately characterized as dualism since “the distinction between the bodily and mental *khandhas* in Buddhism is not intended to suggest that human beings consist of two ontologically distinct substances, one physical and the other mental” (p.149). Rather they are related like ice and steam. There are interesting comments on the *rūpa*- and other *dhātus* as spacial metaphors for spiritual progress, and much interesting material on the *jhānas*.

The final chapter on the body is both topical and appropriate and corrects the widespread misapprehension that early Buddhism held a negative attitude towards the body. The early attitude is better characterized as analytical or clinical, and there is little basis for the suggestion that it regarded the body as inherently defiled. Such attitudes are seen to emerge later “as a result of the Brahminical background in which the teachings took root” (p.181). A good deal of the blame is laid at the door of Buddhaghosa and his supposed Brahmanic upbringing. His description of the human body in

the *Visuddhimagga* is described as “riddled with concern about the polluting effects of bodily secretions, and ... is nothing more than the Brahmanisation of Buddhist hermeneutics” (p.187).

What has been mentioned above is just a fraction of what is contained in this incisive and insightful book. Through a careful and scholarly analysis of the terminology and a determination not to simply accept the received authorities, whether ancient or modern, the book yields new perspectives on vital areas of early Buddhism in almost every chapter. By moving away from the almost obsessive scholarly fixation on “no self” and instead locating the early Buddhist understanding of the individual in the context of its central doctrines much that was obscure is clarified and many fruitful lines of enquiry are opened. This is a book to read and refer to constantly.