



ISSN 1076-9005
Volume 5 1998:99–106
Publication date: 1 May 1998

Pali Buddhism (Curzon Studies in Asian Philosophy). Edited by Frank J. Hoffman and Mahinda Deegalle. Richmond, England: Curzon Press, 1996. Pp. 253. ISBN 0-7007-0359-4, US \$42.00.

Reviewed by

Anne M. Blackburn

Assistant Professor
University of South Carolina
Email: blackburna@garnet.cla.sc.edu

© 1998 Anne M.Blackburn

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.

This is a curious volume. The editors state that their goal is “to provide something approaching a comprehensive understanding of Pāli Buddhism from an interdisciplinary, holistic perspective” (p.5). It is, however, unclear just what “Pāli Buddhism” is. At times it appears to substitute for “Theravāda Buddhism” (p.7). On other occasions, as when the editors discuss the history of Pāli studies and the ways in which scholars have understood the relationship between canonical Pāli texts and “early Buddhism,” (pp.1-7) it seems that “Pāli Buddhism” may refer to “early Buddhism” or to scholarly interpretations—indigenous and “western”—which take Pāli texts as their central focus.

Despite this confusion it is evident that a major aim of the collection is to approach Pāli texts from a comparative philosophical perspective. In doing so, the editors argue that a three-fold approach is most beneficial. This approach combines philological study, “insider” interpretations of Buddhist tradition, and “outsider” philosophical analyses of Buddhism. Thus the editors have arranged this volume in three sections, “Philological Foundations,” “Insiders’ Understandings,” and “Philosophical Implications.” They claim that the essays in this volume, and especially those in part three, offer “a comparative perspective which, at best, opens Eastern doors to Western readers and vice versa without reductionism” (p.4). The comparative perspective, we are told, is of benefit to the study of Buddhism and to the study of philosophy. Philosophical thinking about Buddhism is necessary in order to prevent a “myopic” turn in studies of philology and “the internal working out of Buddhist tradition” (p.5), while “the study of philosophy may be enhanced by taking seriously Asian philosophical texts” (p.6). While the editors do not explain what makes a text “philosophical,” or just how philosophy prevents myopia, they insist that philosophical attention to Buddhist texts is appropriate since “Buddha himself may be viewed as a religious philosopher” (p.11).

Section One contains four essays. While it is not clear what makes these essays particularly good candidates for inclusion under the rubric of “Philological Foundations,” they cover considerable ground as studies of ethics and meditation practice within the Theravāda. George Bond’s “Theravāda Buddhism’s Two Formulations of the *Dasa Sīla* and the Ethics of the Gradual Path” provides an accessible and useful examination of the two formulations of the *dasa sīla* as they appear in the Pāli texts of the Theravāda. Working from a variety of canonical, post-canonical and commentarial texts, Bond argues that the two lists of *sīla* should be understood in the context of Theravāda discussions of the varied “soteriological strategies” (p.17) possible on the gradual path. He shows that the first formulation of abstention from killing, taking what is not given, unchastity,

speaking falsehood, intoxication, untimely eating, shows of dance, song and music, adorning the body, high beds and large beds, and accepting gold and silver were equated by Buddhaghosa and other Pāli commentators with the category of *abhisamācārika sīla*. These *sikkhāpadas* articulate basic expectations of behavior for monastics and (usually as a set of five or eight) provide guidelines for lay Buddhists also. Pāli commentators linked the second formulation of abstention from killing, taking what is not given, wrong sexual conduct, speaking falsely, slander, harsh speech, frivolous talk, covetousness, malevolence and wrong view to the category of *ādibrahmacariyaka sīla*. These *kammaṭṭhas* are considered more profitable guides to action since they indicate the way to diminish greed, hatred and delusion. Bond closes his discussion by describing the *sīla* formulations in terms of an ethics of virtue, concluding that “[t]he practice of virtue is not a mere precondition for following the path, but is an integral component of the path and part of the hierarchy of virtues that constitute the goal” (p.42).

In “A Proposed Model of Early Buddhist Liberation,” Andrew Olendzki seeks a “coherent and meaningful” explanation of the attainment of *nirvāṇa* (p.43). In doing so he argues that a two-part model of liberation is needed in order to “represent” “what it is that becomes liberated, and what it is that it becomes liberated from; precisely what it is that ceases in the first phase of *nibbāna* and what it is that ceases in the second phase or *parinibbāna*; and what it is that is annihilated with attainment in this lifetime and what it is that is transformed or liberated” (p.49, author’s emphasis). Arguing that it is better to adopt an indigenous model than to impose an alien one, Olendzki turns to *paṭiccasamuppāda*. Noting that Pāli texts use *paṭiccasamuppāda* to describe the processes through which the unenlightened experience suffering and existence, Olendzki proposes a reinterpretation, according to which the twelve factors of *paṭiccasamuppāda* are distinguished as part of two distinct groups, or “sub-systems.” One group “is made up of those factors which collectively comprise suffering” while the other “consists of those elements which form the early Buddhist psychological model of being or person” (pp.51-2). According to Olendzki’s model, “[w]hat the attainment of liberation or of *nibbāna* in this lifetime actually accomplishes is the separation of these two groups of factors.... The crucial point to recognize here is that when suffering ceases, a being persists” (p.53).

Subramania Gopalan undertakes a comparative study of the concept of “the good life” in the Dhammapada and *Tirukkural* arguing that they are of interest because “though they incorporate within themselves the essentials of a serious philosophy of man and are highly suggestive of the need for cross-cultural philosophizing, they are comprehensible by the common man” (pp.57-8). Gopalan provides a brief introduction to the Buddha and *Tiruvalluvar*,

describing the Buddha as someone who “tried to reform the church by removing the sloth the tradition had gathered during its long history, and rekindle the spirit which had not been put out due to the basic vitality it possessed” (p.60). After a discussion of the ways in which the analogies contained in both “classics” made possible an “interiorization of ideas” and the “inner transformation of man” (pp.61-3), Gopalan turns to the “Buddhistic and the Tamil concept of the good life” as “reflected in the concepts of *nirvāṇa* and *vīdu*” (p.64). Here Gopalan describes the life of dharma which leads to *nirvāṇa*, “the Transcendent state of the Good” (p.66) and the disciplined life—*aram*—which leads to *vīdu*, “the state of ultimate spiritual perfection” (p.69). The essay closes with a comparison between the “early Buddhism” of the *Dhammapada* and the “philosophy” of *Tirukkural*, in which allegedly “unique features” of Buddhism (materialism, atheism, nihilism, pessimism and renunciation) taken from Bateson and Spiro are used as a focusing lens.

Christopher Chapple’s article on “Abhidharma as Paradigm for Practice” closes the section on “Philological Foundations.” Chapple notes that the Abhidharma is intended to “provide a framework for understanding the human condition in a manner consonant with the fundamental teachings of the Buddha” (p.80). Focusing first on the five *skandhas*, Chapple argues that we see “two modes of ‘selfness’” indicated by the Buddha in the Pāli *nikāyas*. The first is “inauthentic self” characterized by identity with suffering and change. The second is “authentic self” which is “purified, made free, enlightened: this is the state of Buddhahood later described as the uncovering of the *tathāgatagarbha*” (p.82). Chapple then argues that the Buddhist concern to catalogue the inauthentic led to the Abhidharma teachings. A long description of the dharmas listed within Pāli and Sanskrit Abhidharma texts follows, after which we are told that the Abhidharma should be seen as “prescriptive rather than descriptive” (90). The essay goes on to provide a description of insight meditation practice quoting passages from the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (somewhat odd perhaps given the volume’s title). Chapple concludes with a whirlwind tour of “later Buddhist and other traditions” which emphasize “radical self-understanding and purgation of all notions of self” p.(98), noting that concern for nonattachment to self is apparent not only in Buddhist tantra but in *Sāṃkhya*, the *Symposium* and works of St. John of the Cross.

Section Two, “Insiders’ Understandings,” begins with an account of “The Moral Significance of Buddhist *Nirvāṇa*” by Mahinda Deegalle. Deegalle proposes to examine the concept of “*nirvāṇa* in early Buddhism in order to discern its relationship with morality, and to explore its social implications and its importance as a paradigm for our lives” (p.106). Arguing that *nirvāṇa* is seen by “early Buddhism”—a term which remains undefined in

the essay, and which seems strange in the context of the Introduction’s reference to Steven Collins’ rejection of the equation between the Pāli canon and “early Buddhism” (p.2)—as moral perfection, the paper explores the moral life in terms of skillful and unskillful action along the path to liberation. The article concludes with an argument against those who view *nirvāṇa* as a “selfish ideal,” drawing attention to the role of enlightened people as “spiritual guides” (p.116).

Padmasiri de Silva continues the exploration of “early Buddhism”—still undefined—in an article on “Suicide and Emotional Ambivalence: An Early Buddhist Perspective.” De Silva argues that the “early Buddhist” perspective on suicide should be understood in terms of the interplay of *bhava taṇhā* and *vibhava taṇhā*, claiming that “[t]he ambivalence which emerges in the inter-play of these two forms of craving, perhaps, provide [sic] a little key to understand some of the puzzling facets of this thicket of suicide” (p.121). While it is unclear just what de Silva means by the “thicket of suicide” the essay goes on to discuss the threshold between “authentic turning away” (p.127) from existence which can be harnessed as part of training on the Buddhist path and suicide which is itself a form of grasping (p.125). Asking whether there are Buddhist grounds for “altruistic suicide,” de Silva concludes in the negative, since infliction of harm upon oneself violates the principle of the middle way.

With “The Logical Grammar of the Word ‘Rebirth’ in the Buddhist Paradigm: A Philosophical Sketch,” A. D. P. Kalansuriya uses a Wittgensteinian distinction to argue that the word “rebirth” in Buddhism should be understood as an ethical term rather than an empirical one, and that the failure to realize this has led scholars of Buddhism “into a blind-alley” (p.134) as they attempt to find conclusive proof or definitive substantiation for rebirth experiences. “The logical grammar of the word ‘rebirth’...falls within the precinct of [sic] Buddhist language-game which [sic] nucleus is but an ethical code—a procedural guide—*ariyaṭṭhaṅgikamagga*” (pp.135-6). Kalansuriya’s conclusion asserts that “rebirth” is “an ethics-based, ethics-oriented procedural guide with a definitive and an unconditional end, namely, *nibbāna*. If so, no amount of empirical data [is going]...to prove or disprove it simply because it is outside the scope of facts. That is to say, it is ethical in nature...empirical criteria remain logically inappropriate” (pp.138-9).

In “A Buddhist Critique of Theravāda,” Gunapala Dharmasiri asserts that the Buddha’s “crucial message” is “that one should be totally critical of all forms of authority” (p.141), and he points to the *Kālāma Sutta* to make his case. Contemporary Theravāda, writes Dharmasiri, contradicts the “spirit of the teachings of the Buddha” by granting tradition privilege over “self-

analysis and self-examination” (p.143). From this far-reaching claim, Dharmasiri goes on to note areas of contemporary Theravāda practice which he finds problematic. These include the idea of postponing the attainment of *nirvāṇa* until the Buddha Maitreya, the belief that only a monk is fully capable of becoming enlightened, a “highly patriarchal attitude,” the caste system, emphasis on merit-making, unwillingness to ordain nuns, routinized meditation, the arahant ideal and the absence of compassion, Buddhist inattention to refugees, improper use of religious donations, secularization and politicization of the sangha, and the failure to confront the violence faced by Sri Lankans (pp.143–153). In sum, according to Dharmasiri, “Theravāda is a technology catering for the smooth running in [sic] *samsāra* with all its evils” (p.150). The essay concludes with the suggestion that the teachings of Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Tantra should be “rehabilitated in terms of their original teachings” (p.156) and then used to criticize one another.

The final section, “Philosophical Implications,” begins with an article by A. L. Herman on “Two Dogmas of Buddhism.” Herman argues that all Buddhist traditions have been conditioned by two dogmas: *anitya-duḥkha* and *nirvāṇa*, that these dogmas are false, and that they are logically inconsistent since even if one were true the other could not be so. With regard to *anitya*, Herman states that “if any impermanent state of activity could be shown to be instrumentally happy because it leads to ultimate happiness and the avoidance of all *duḥkha* then it would be false to argue, as the Buddhists do, that ‘what is impermanent is not worth delighting in, not worth being impressed by, not worth clinging to’” (p.164). Quoting Rahula in a long note, Herman argues rather tendentiously that the view of *nirvāṇa* as unconditioned and therefore unaffected by any cause is a “quibbling and obfuscating” defense because it “flies in the face even of Buddhist common sense where paths that lead to things, if followed, get you to those things...” (pp.164–5). In his discussion of *nirvāṇa* we find the following statement: “*Nirvāṇa* must be seen either negatively or positively; there is no third alternative. The conclusion of the dilemma is then that *nirvāṇa* is either suicidal obliteration or inconsistent continuance” (p.170).

In “What is the Status of the Doctrine of Dependent Origination?” Ramakrishna Puligandla asks whether *paṭiccasamuppāda* is an a priori truth, an analytic truth, a synthetic truth or an inductive generalization. After arguing for the teaching as a “synthetic a priori truth (in the Kantian sense)” Puligandla abandons this categorization in favor of classification as “phenomenological truth” since *paṭiccasamuppāda* is not “some abstract intellectual construction, but is experienced directly and purely phenomenologically” (p.181). From this conclusion Puligandla explores the similarities and differences “concerning the doctrine of not-self (*anatta* [sic])

in the Buddha and Hume” (p.182): “Hume did not come to the claim of non-self in the same way the Buddha did... Hume did not have the doctrine of dependent origination in any of the versions” (pp.182-3).

Shanta Ratnayaka explores criticisms of “the Buddhist theory of causality” (p.184) by proponents of process philosophy, arguing that Theravāda Buddhism is able to answer these criticisms. “Process Philosophy and Theravāda Buddhism” briefly describes criticisms of karma, dependent origination in Hua-yen Buddhism, Nāgārjuna’s analysis of causal processes, Tantric ideas of ‘total togetherness,’ Hīnayāna and Yogācāra understandings of reality, the absence of creativity in Hua-yen Buddhism, universal compassion and *nirvāṇa* (p.185-194). In each case Ratnayaka argues that a Theravāda perspective satisfies the process critics and concludes that: “[t]herefore, here we all—king Milinda, his discussant Nāgasena, Whitehead, Hartshorne, Odin, and the reader as well as the writer of this essay—can come to a common ground of understanding where Process Philosophy and Theravāda Buddhism nest together in peace and harmony!” (p.195).

In “Theravāda and Processes: *Nirvāṇa* as a Meta-process,” Ninian Smart suggests that the Buddha’s unanswered questions invite philosophers to think again about *nirvāṇa* since all of these questions “are secretly or overtly about the same thing, namely nibbāna” (p.196), which cannot be known or articulated (p.205). Smart then asks whether *nirvāṇa* might be understood as a transcendent process—“process beyond process”—arguing that this fits with “Buddhist non-substantialism (p.201). What might characterize this “trancendent process”? According to Smart, we might think of *nirvāṇa*-as-process as a timeless process, or a “holistic ‘stretch’ of consciousness” (p.201). The final portion of the essay asks whether philosophers might explore a model of the universe characterized by phenomena and “a hinterland of process which is as yet unknowable to us” p.(205).

Frank J. Hoffman’s account of “Orientalism in Buddhology” concludes the volume. Advocating a “pluralizing of philosophy of religion,” Hoffman states that recent discussions of “the political dimension of attempts to know the philosophies of other cultures,” (which he associates with Marxism and deconstruction) pose an important challenge to philosophy of religion (p.209). Noting Said’s criticisms of Orientalist essentialism and synchronic analyses of “Others,” Hoffman asks how scholars are to heed Said and still move “to a positive view of reality which scholarship might uncover” p.(216). Looking briefly at work by Ninian Smart and Paul Griffiths with Said’s criticisms in mind, Hoffman suggests that maintaining an emic/etic distinction is helpful, and that this frees philosophers to interpret Buddhist tradition. If scholars are “modest in their claims” and “sensitive to the occurrence of stereotypes” it is possible to construct “a philosophy of Buddhist religion” with-

out violating Said's criticisms p.(223), which will provide the necessary stepping-stone to the philosophy of religions in a "full sense" (p.209). Hoffman's "Methodological Recommendations for Philosophers of Buddhist Religion" concludes the essay, as he challenges scholars to undertake "the philosophically interpretive study of Buddhism" (p.226): "Neither an apologist nor a despiser be,' 'Avoid apologetics,' 'Be not a shunner of experiencing, but of relativism,' 'Thou shalt not slight truth'" (pp.223-5).

Despite a rather incoherent structure and poor production (there are typographical errors on far too many pages), *Pali Buddhism* contains several essays which may be of interest to scholars of Buddhism. Bond's essay is certainly of use to those interested in the ways in which the idea of a "gradual path" is articulated within the textual tradition of the Theravāda. Olendzki's analysis of *nirvāṇa* using *paṭiccasamuppāda* is certain to draw criticism from those interested in Buddhist reasons for silence with regard to *nirvāṇa*, but may interest teachers seeking new ways to explain the condition of a living Buddha or arahant. The discussion of *paṭiccasamuppāda* in Puligandla's article and Kalansuriya's thoughts on the "grammar" of rebirth provoke questions about the degree to which a philosophical account of Buddhist concepts should attend to a broader soteriological context. Herman's account of *nirvāṇa* as a false and inconsistent dogma, along with Smart's view of *nirvāṇa* as transcendent process are likely to spark rebuttal. Scholars of contemporary Theravāda Buddhist cultures may also find food for thought in Dharmasiri's sharp criticisms of the Theravāda. While faulty as an historical account of "original" Buddhism, his essay prompts reflection on Sri Lankan and Southeast Asian struggles to forge a Buddhist response to social inequality and political violence.