

Book Reviews

The Theravāda Abhidhamma: its inquiry into the nature of conditioned reality, by Y. Karunadasa (Centre for Buddhist Studies, University of Hong Kong: 2010).

Professor Y. Karunadasa has had a distinguished career as a leading scholar of Pali Buddhism in general and of Abhidhamma studies in particular. Trained first at the University of Ceylon and then at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, he was in a leading position at the University of Kelaniya for many years (receiving several honors for a lifetime of academic service in Sri Lanka) while also holding distinguished chairs and visiting posts at the universities of London, Calgary, Toronto, and Hong Kong, where he is currently engaged.

His most recent volume, *The Theravāda Abhidhamma: its inquiry into the nature of conditioned reality* (2010), is published by the Centre of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong and has all the hallmarks of a capstone project of that illustrious career. As Bhikkhu Bodhi says in a brief forward:

Professor Y. Karunadasa is the ideal person to write such a work. He is perhaps the most erudite Sri Lankan scholar of Abhidhamma who combines breadth of learning with fluency in the English language. He is acquainted with almost the entire body of Abhidhamma literature in both Pāli and Sinhala, as well as works by contemporary Sri Lankan expositors of Abhidhamma. He knows the Sarvāsitvāda Abhidharma and thus can draw comparisons between the Theravādin and Sarvāstivādin systems. He is also acquainted with Western philosophy and psychology, and thus can build bridges between the frameworks of Western thought and classical Abhidhamma, both Theravādin and Sarvāstivādin. To add to this, he has long experience teaching the Abhidhamma in English.

Although several of the chapters were printed earlier as Buddhist Publication Society (BPS) publications, these are woven here into a larger and more comprehensive treatment of the subject. Prof. Karunadasa begins his treatise by outlining the scope of the tradition he is addressing, and thus makes a distinction between the Early Buddhism of the *Sutta Piṭaka* and the comprehensive system of thought that has come to be called

Abhidhamma (p. 3). This he traces from early methodological tendencies in some the *suttas* of the first four *Nikāyas*, through the canonical commentaries of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* such as *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, to the seven books of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, all of which are within the Pali Canon. He then goes on to show how the more fully developed system is really worked out in the Commentaries (*Aṭṭhakathā*) of both *Piṭakas* (and in the *Visuddhimagga*, which stems from the same strata of Buddhist exegesis) and is finally presented in the nine Abhidhamma compendiums of still later times, along with their commentaries and sub-commentaries.

It is the best known of these later manuals, the *Abhidhammatṭhasangaha*, that serves as the closest model for the author's own explication of the system. Chapters on consciousness, mental factors, the cognitive process, material phenomena, and conditional relations all follow in succession, much as in the *Sangaha*. This text already has an excellent translation and explication in Bhikkhu Bodhi's *Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma* (BPS Pariyatti:1993), but Prof. Karunadasa's work goes well beyond this resource in two important ways.

First, he expands the range to include the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma literature, preserving not only parallel Sanskrit versions of the seven core *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* texts but also, in compendiums such as the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, valuable discussion of the positions held by Sautrāntikas and other Sanskrit Abhidharma schools. This material is brought to the table in generous helpings to situate the Abhidhamma's issues in a wider philosophical perspective, and is valuable in helping the reader sort through some of the threads of Indian thought generally. All this was necessarily well beyond the scope of Ven. Bodhi's volume.

The second important expansion is Prof. Karunadasa's examination of specific issues of interest that, while mentioned in the *Sangaha*, are given the much fuller treatment they deserve. We thus have entire chapters devoted to the nature of *dharmas* and of *paññattis*, the two truths, time and space, and to momentariness, as well as an Appendix that specifically discusses the relationship between the designations Theravāda and Vibhajjavāda. The issue of material factors is addressed in no fewer than five chapters. These subjects form some of the most interesting and challenging dimensions of the Abhidhamma tradition, so the attention given them by Prof. Karunadasa is greatly appreciated. We'll look more closely at the first of these, the *dhamma* theory, to give some taste of how the material is handled.

At the heart of the Buddha's perspective on human experience is the insight, gained through meditation, that the mind and body consist of a number of functions and processes in continual flux, arising and ceasing

interdependently. The earlier approach seems to treat these empirically and phenomenologically, as events that are known through observation, while as time goes on the Abhidhamma gradually seems to treat them more rationally and ontologically, as fundamental units of actuality. In the *suttas* we find several parallel and mutually compatible schemas for regarding lived experience: *nāma-rūpa* (mental and physical factors) co-arising with *viññāṇa* (consciousness); five *khandhas* (aggregates); six *dhātus* (elements); twelve *āyatana*s (bases of cognition); and eighteen *dhātus* (elements of cognition). All this is consolidated and expanded in the Abhidhamma system, yielding a model that enumerates twenty-eight material factors, fifty-two mental factors, and eighty-nine varieties of consciousness.

Each of these components is treated equally as a *dhamma*, and how exactly we are to construe these *dhammas* is a matter of some philosophical subtlety that evolves throughout the Buddhist intellectual tradition. Prof. Karunadasa suggests that the move toward this more comprehensive *dhamma* theory is an attempt through analysis (*bheda*) to reduce all experience to its most basic, irreducible components, and then through synthesis (*sangaha*) to show that these units are not themselves ultimate because they can only occur in a complex web of inter-relationships. He joins Nyanaponika Thera (*Abhidhamma Studies* BPS/Wisdom: 1998) in reminding us that the analysis is undertaken in the first book of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, while the synthesis is accomplished in its monumental concluding volume, the *Paṭṭhāna*. Among other things, this approach attempts to avoid the pitfalls of both pluralism and monism, threading the proverbial middle way between these extremes. As the author sums up, “The rejection of both alternatives means that the *dhammas* are not fractions of a whole indicating an absolute unity, nor are they a concatenation of discrete entities. They are a multiplicity of inter-connected but distinguishable co-ordinate factors.” In other words, “they are phenomena with no corresponding noumena.” (p. 22)

Next we hear of how the *dhamma* model was used by the orthodox to ward off the challenge of the Pudgalavādins, an early schism in the movement organized around the notion that a person (*pudgala*) must be some sort of real entity in order to account for both rebirth and moral responsibility. The Abhidhamma innovation of two truths, the consensual (*sammuti*) and the ultimate (*paramattha*), is meant to acknowledge the provisional existence of a person (among other things) while maintaining plausible deniability that such a person is real in any ultimate sense. This argument is treated in greater detail, and is taken well beyond the Pudgalavādin controversy, in a separate chapter dedicated to the idea.

A more significant philosophical dispute arose from the Sarvāstivādin

position that the *dhammas* “all exist” (*sarva asti*), that is, are real in the past and future in addition to manifesting in the present. This idea seems called for in understanding how karma can exert its influence over time, how memory works (including the recall of former lives), and how the details of perception and cognition unfold moment to moment. Prof. Karunadasa walks us through all this very helpfully, rehearsing the *Kathāvatthu* arguments against the notion of tri-temporality, as well as explicating the critiques in the Abhidhamma *Ṭīkā* literature of the Sarvāstivādin’s four theories of how the phenomenology and ontology of the *dhammas* might be reconciled. This is the sort of information, so clearly presented, that cannot easily be found elsewhere and demonstrates the value of this volume.

The signature issue of the *dhamma* theory is of course the question of *svabhāva* (own-nature) and how this label is construed by the different Buddhist schools. While the term is used in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* to state that the aggregates are devoid of any self-nature (*svabhāvena suñṇam*), the word does not occur at all in the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. It is in the somewhat later commentarial tradition, which as Prof. Karunadasa suggests is well versed in the Sarvāstivāda developments, that we find a careful clarification that a *dhamma* is not something that bears its own conditions but is something that is being borne by its own conditions (p. 37). The confusion, say the commentators, stems from attributing agency (*kattu*) or instrumentally (*karāṇa*) definitions to the term, both of which are provisional and are not meant to be taken literally, rather than using the more correct definition by nature (*bhāva-sādhana*).

Throughout this fascinating discussion of *dhammas* and the *dhamma* theory a picture emerges of the Pali Abhidhamma tradition maintaining the existence of the *dhammas* in a real and ultimate sense, but with these terms being used epistemologically and phenomenologically to refer only to ultimate units of experience. This keeps the whole system close to its purpose of serving as a guide for meditative contemplation and insight (p. 40), and resists the philosophical drift of the Sanskrit Abhidharma tradition toward greater rationality and ontological promiscuity. The resulting realism of the Sarvāstivādins eventually called for the corrective action of Nāgārjuna and the Yogācārins.

It is a real treat to have these matters so carefully and clearly rendered by a true master of his craft. Prof. Karunadasa is to be congratulated for offering us this volume, which can be read as an introduction to Abhidhamma, as a companion for working one’s way through the *Abhidhammatthasangaha*, or as a textbook of Buddhist philosophy and psychology generally.

Andrew Olendzki

The Monks and Me: How 40 Days at Thich Nhat Hanh's French Monastery Guided Me Home, by Mary Paterson
(Hampton Roads Publishing: Charlottesville, VA, 2012, p. 235)

I have not been a fan of Thich Nhat Hanh's writings. What I had read of the Vietnamese teacher struck me as Hallmark-card Buddhism for the peace-and-love, New Age set, with a hefty helping of Christianity. "Being peace" sounds good, but what does it mean? How does one do it? My training was in Thai-based Theravada Buddhism and I preferred, and still prefer, the harder-edged, tougher-minded teachings of, say, Chogyam Trungpa or Aachen Chah.

And yet, I was pleasantly surprised by Mary Paterson's meditation diary, *The Monks and Me*, about her forty days as a lay meditator at Thich Nhat Hanh's hermitage, Plum Village, in the south of France.

Paterson, a Toronto yoga teacher with years of meditative experience, seamlessly combines her personal experiences with Thich Nhat Hanh's deeper Buddhist teachings, and she persuaded me that this gentle, New Age approach might work for many seekers. The teachings of Thây, as Paterson also calls him, certainly worked well for her. Several times in her book, while pondering Thây's words or writings, she describes non-dual experiences that some traditions call glimpses of enlightenment, although Paterson makes no claim to being enlightened.

So, at her first talk by Thich Nhat Hanh at Plum Village, the monk held up a yellow rose and said, cryptically: "A rose is not a rose; that is why it is a real rose." Many lay meditators are baffled by this Zen-like, "direct-seeing" approach, but Paterson gets it:

And then it happens. I've felt it at other times in my life, but it always delights me. I become suffused with a warm, buzzing sensation at the level of my spine, between my shoulder blades. ... I blissfully think, "Everything makes sense." In this moment I have all I would ever need to feel secure (28).

She adds: "The truth is that everything is simply made up of things it is not—a yellow rose flower is simply a bunch of non-yellow-rose-flower things coming together to create a beautiful, fragrant plant with lovely petals" (29). This is a simple, and very lovely, way of describing the non-self (*anatta*) and transient (*anicca*) nature of all conditioned things,

and very much Paterson's style in the 40 chapters of her book: she has an experience in or outside the monastery, painful or (mostly) pleasant, followed by a lucid and inspiring meditation on the Buddhist teaching.

Paterson had these non-dual revelations, and apparently quite often, before visiting Plum Village. She describes a retreat experience in the New Mexican mountains years earlier:

I stood up to stretch my legs and began walking along the mountain. ... Every step I took melted into the dry earth as the vastness of the sky diffused into me. In those moments, there had been no separation between what I knew of as me and everything else in my view. Within that sense of oneness I had glimpsed truth.

Remembering that revelation while at Plum Village gives her a similar non-dual experience: "With these mindful reflections I go beyond my familiar self, beyond my body. I seem to be only my breath. The defining lines of my body fade as I merge with the space" (129).

After her first *vipassana* meditation retreat, in India, she writes:

My every cell was jumping with happiness. In my state of elation I floated over to this curly haired twenty-something guy to ask how he was feeling, thinking, of course, that he would be as high as me. He wasn't. In fact, the young man had felt as if his mind was a huge garbage bin full of foul, rotting filth, and that the act of meditating had opened the lid on the squalid mess that was his mind (210).

My sympathies are with the young man. For many students, the first years of meditation are more like his than the blissful spiritual practice that Paterson enjoyed.

At Plum Village, Paterson has some negative moments, but they mainly revolve around several fellow meditators with whom she doesn't get along, stiff shoulders, and a bad case of the flu. She, in fact, seems blissfully—and I use that word deliberately—unaware of how unusual she is in finding the meditative practice so delightful right from the beginning. So, is Paterson fooling herself?

I think not. First, her training as a ballet dancer and career as a yoga teacher would give her strong concentration and mindfulness, as well as a supple body, coming into Plum Village. For her, the physical pain that afflicts many new and even experienced meditators, especially sitting on floor cushions rather than chairs, was a minor problem.

Second, the descriptions of her practice hang together and reflect, often in quirky and unusual images, almost every aspect of the Buddhist teachings, from non-self, to suffering, to transience, to coping with anger, to finding infinity in a grain of sand (or, in Paterson's case, the legs of a spider).

On the other hand, she sometimes breaks the lay monastic discipline in ways that, in a more structured meditative approach, would be grounds for expulsion. For example, she doesn't want to attend a particular monastery function. So she gets permission to work on her diary instead, then takes a taxi into town for a lunch with a fellow meditator who is also playing hooky by faking illness. Paterson often ignores the first waking bell to get an extra 15 minutes of dozing. In stricter systems, even lay people get up with the bell whether they want to or not, and they certainly don't go into town for a chat and omelettes. In the more tough-minded systems, scrupulous obedience to the monastic rules is an integral part of breaking down attachment to selfish impulses. Thich Nhat Hanh's system is clearly more forgiving. And, perhaps, if Paterson is an example, Thây's approach may work better than the more rigorous systems for some Westerners, in whom, my teacher believed, the "hate/intelligent" temperament predominates.¹ The *Visuddhimagga*, the Buddhist *Path of Purity*, recommends an easier, gentler discipline for those with the "hate" temperament, and Thich Nhat Hanh's approach seems to meet this criterion.

That said, Paterson could have brought a bit more critical discrimination and detail into her depiction of lay monastic life. We learn little about the daily monastic routine, although this might be of interest to meditators in other systems. And, while the book is very well-written, there is too much gushing description. For example, the people she meets at Plum Village are almost all exquisite or unusual in some way, perhaps based on Thây's teachings that "if you look for ugly, that is what you will see. But if you look for beauty, that grace will reveal itself to you" (163).

¹ The *Visuddhimagga* identifies three basic temperaments: craving/faith, hatred/intelligent, and deluded/speculative, with different teaching styles appropriate for each. And so, in *Visuddhimagga*, Chapter III, Sections 98-99, the dwelling place for a "hate/intelligent" temperament is described as follows: "A suitable resting place for one of hating temperament is not too high or too low, provided with shade and water, with well-proportioned walls, posts and steps, with well-prepared frieze work and lattice work, brightened with various kinds of painting, with an even, smooth soft floor, adorned with festoons of flowers," and so on. This gentler meditation regime makes the world seem like a more pleasant place for those of hating temperament, in which there is "frequent occurrence of such states as anger, enmity, disparaging, domineering, envy and avarice" (Chap III, Sect. 95).

And so, Thich Nhat Hanh is portrayed in terms that make him seem more of an ethereal spirit than a flesh-and-blood human being. Paterson's companions at the monastery are mostly "wise" or "radiant" or "a vision of peace." A 21-year-old American has a "quiet but strong presence" (152). But, if he's like many meditative aspirants of that age I have met, he could simply be bored with a comfortable, middle-class upbringing, and hopes Eastern teachings will bring some exoticism and excitement into his life before he settles down to a career. In general, no group of people is that perfect, that fascinating, that talented. But then, as Paterson says of her moments of negativity: "I have often amplified what is and made it into what it is not" (171). I suspect she has also amplified the positive moments at Plum Village, and the result too often reads like a portrait seen through rose-colored glasses.

That said, *The Monks and Me* meets three requirements for a satisfying lay meditative diary. One, she writes colorfully and well. Two, her book is, as far as I can tell, an accurate picture of the Buddha's teaching, and often delights with the freshness of its images and insights. Third, *The Monks and Me* offers inspiration for both potential and experienced Buddhist meditators.

While Thich Nhat Hanh's style still doesn't appeal to me, personally, I had much more respect for his approach after reading Paterson's book. However, while she gives an inspiring and loving account of the beautiful rose that is Thich Nhat Hanh's monastic system, *The Monks and Me* would be stronger if she had described a few more of the thorns.

Paul MacRae