

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 *Viśuddhimagga*, 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 *Abhidhammaṭṭhasangaha*, 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 *dharmma* 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 *āyatanas* (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 *dharmas* 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 *dharmas* 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 suññam*), 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.

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