

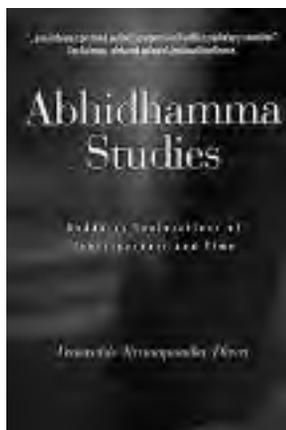
Abhidhamma Studies

Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time

By Venerable Nyanaponika Thera
Edited and Revised by Bhikku Bodhi

KANDY, SRI LANKA: BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY IN
COLLABORATION WITH WISDOM PUBLICATIONS
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 1998
145 PAGES

This reflective, scholarly work was written during the aftermath of World War II, following the author's return to Sri Lanka, after having spent the years 1941 to 1946 in a civilian internment camp at Dehra Dun. The present edition is the fourth and reflects what Bhikku Bodhi, the editor, considers to be a clearer explication of the first three editions. It should be noted that the manuscript was written in Pali rather than Sanskrit, so words like *kamma*, *sutta*, and *dhamma* may need to be transposed in the reader's mind into spelling that may be more familiar; that is, karma, sutra, and dharma, respectively.



Bhikku Bodhi begins this edition with a review of fundamental Abhidhamma philosophy. While these introductory remarks are primarily descriptive, the editor terminates his introductory chapter with an apologia for the value of the author's work and profundity of thought. Bhikku Bodhi argues that the author has made salient contributions to understanding the Buddha's teachings (the Abhidhamma) and that even though these teachings were born so long ago, they are, nonetheless, extremely contemporary in their explication of philosophical psychology.

The book's treatment of consciousness and time is thoroughly Buddhist; however, as readers make their way through the work, they may readily recognize aspects of contemporary Western psychological thought and theory. Phrases like "phenomenal field," for example, bring to mind the work of phenomenological-humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, and the emphasis on self-knowledge reminds us of Jungian self-realization. The mind is the chief determinant of human destiny in Buddhism, the author instructs us, so the focus on consciousness and its contents is vital to the fundamental knowing of an object in the world. Careful isolation of the object, together with a simultaneous recognition of its relatedness to everything else, is reminiscent of Husserl's bracketing of objects in the phenomenal field together with the notion of interdependence so thoughtfully propounded by a number of Western psychological thinkers.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Readers can see, while reading this work, that all manner of associations with the work of others arise. It is in this sense that *Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time* can be rightfully considered synthetic as well as expository of the uniqueness of Buddhist thinking.

Fundamentally, the Abhidhamma argues that the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teaching is freedom from suffering and craving. The Buddhist system is practical, not utilizing metaphysical concepts such as "soul" to explain the human relationship to a "divine" ontological principle. Buddhist psychology suggests, in fact, that human beings have the capacity to reach enlightenment without recourse to an external divinity. But we must understand the correct methods of behaving and thinking in order to progress toward liberation. We must free our minds from such notions as soul, ego, self, and anything else that we conventionally consider a relatively permanent entity, since no such permanence or "individuality" exists.

At the heart of liberation is the realistic recognition of *anatta*, the doctrine of the "non-self." Not only does this doctrine reinforce the idea that nothing is permanent and that nothing is separable from anything else, it also flies in the face of our usual way of thinking about ourselves and others. We must come to understand that there is, in reality, no separation between or among elements in the world, and holding on to the language of "self," "mine," and "me" flow in the opposite direction of right thinking. Today's psychologists might say, in this regard, that it is necessary to "reframe our perceptual sets" in order to release ourselves from false conceptions (Adler's

"fictional finalisms"). Insight comes when we become capable of "seeing" that everything is one—that there is no separation at all. Separation is illusion.

Ultimate insight is not, however, gained primarily through cognitive understanding of these truths; rather, we are set free fundamentally through our experiencing of life as we live it in the moment. Thinking "about" anything is to abstract from that "thing" by putting into verbal abstractions (i.e., words) elements of experience. To know, in the higher sense, may very well mean to not know in the usual sense. At the very least, we must keep cognitive knowledge in its proper place in our lives. Ultimately, the reality of anything is in the experiencing of it. Everything else is illusion.

Everything, it has been said, is related to everything else. It is very important, therefore, to understand the nature of these relations. The social interaction patterns and relationships between people are conditioned upon the internal relations of these persons. By this, Buddhists mean that how we behave externally is a reflection of the degree of balance between and among the elements of our personalities. Hence, the way I treat another mirrors what is going on inside myself and speaks to my degree of balance and psychological development. Moreover, when I am thinking about another person, the mere intention of my consciousness also reflects my inner reality and is, by definition, *kammic*, affecting the balance of energies in the universe.

The author discusses, at some length, a list of mental constituents, including the spiritual factors. Some of these constituents, such as joy, might arguably fall into the contemporary category of psychological affects, or emotions, rather than strictly mental factors. However, one must recall that, in Buddhism, the mind determines everything, including emotional reactions; hence, the mind is the beginning, or the foundation, of all human experience. Because life is constituted of sometimes complex and diverse realities, we must keep our minds flexible in order to deal appropriately with the demands life places upon us.

Buddhist thinking suggests that, when we are not sufficiently developed, we may become slow to adapt, our thinking may become rigid, and we may take refuge in dogma. Basic habits may begin to rule our lives and behaviors as we fail to respond adequately to life's complexities. At times, a single faculty may dominate the personality while other valuable faculties are left undeveloped. These problems speak to disharmony in the personality from the Buddhist perspective, but they also have contemporary psychological implications. If one were to synthesize these Buddhist ideas with contemporary psychology, one might argue that, in the first instance, rigidity of thinking, conceptual simplicity, and inflexibility are common components of certain anxiety disorders (i.e., neuroses), and that in the second instance, if the single faculty that is overdeveloped is dysfunctional (e.g., manipulateness, lying), we are bordering on a discussion of certain personality disorders. Venerable Nyanaponika Thera appears to be discussing aspects of what we today call "abnormal psychology."

It is vital that we recognize our capacity to become whole, says the author. Non-greed, non-hate, and non-delusion form the anchoring principles for this wholeness. Tranquility, undisturbed by nervous restlessness, is important for a clear mind and flexible interactions. Spon-

Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace



Alfred Bloom

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taneous and intuitive living are limited when we become enslaved to conceit, opinionatedness, and the obstruction of free-flowing energy through tension. Tranquility is essential for true happiness, peace of mind, and enlightenment itself. Meditation practice is a primary vehicle for achieving this tranquil state. In fact, anything that disturbs the mind's tranquility with agitation should be avoided. With a calm mind, then, we should embrace the Middle Way, which transcends the extremes of thought and behavior as well as forms our character in healthy ways.

Consciousness and time cannot be separated, first of all because nothing can really be separated from anything else. But, in addition, this is the case because consciousness occurs in time. Further, the universe knows no disconnected events, and humans experience "past, present, and future" in the present. Time, then, is a human construct that allows us to artificially separate mind-consciousness into units, but finally, time is an illusion. Everything occurs simultaneously, and only the present is reality. In the final analysis, consciousness means to be aware of an object, and the experience of time means being aware of the apparent movement of an object that we are aware of in consciousness.

Readers may have noticed that, as I have summarized the content of this book, I have drawn some parallels between Buddhist Abhidhamma thinking and contemporary psychological theory and conceptualization. Venerable Nyanaponika Thera's work is appropriate for today's students of world religions, philosophy, and psychology since it is, as the editor Bhikku Bodhi has said, interestingly contemporary. Parts of this book are complicated and technical, while others readily resonate with what readers may themselves have experienced in life.

This is a thorough, thoughtful, and respectful treatment of Buddhist psychology that will benefit those who are willing to devote the time and energy to understanding not merely what it is actually saying, but also the numerous connections to Western thought that are embedded in the text. I would recommend it especially for those who have already had some background in philosophical or psychological thought; hence, I would consider the book appropriate for college sophomores and above. It could easily be used as a secondary text in any course whose goal is to teach the fundamentals of Buddhist psychology either primarily or as an adjunctive epistemology within a broader context. Careful guidance of students through the more technical and complex parts of the book may be required, and a general overview of Buddhist psychology, prior to reading the work, may be helpful. I would expect most instructors to find that their students will be readily able to apply any number of Buddhist ideas to their own lives. ■

RICHARD BOOTH is Professor of Psychology at Black Hawk College, Quad-Cities Campus in Moline, Illinois. He is also a licensed psychotherapist who maintains a part-time private practice. Dr. Booth has published numerous articles in professional journals, is an Advising Editor for *Journal of Mind and Behavior*, and has been a Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Honolulu on two occasions. His primary research interests include the study of loneliness, happiness, and cross-cultural psychologies.

BOOKS RECEIVED

Books listed here were recently received by the editors. Normally, we do not plan reviews of titles on this list.

ASIA GENERAL

Bhatti, Ghazala. *Asian Children at Home and at School: An Ethnographic Study*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Lee, Yok-shiu F. and Alvin Y. So. *Asia's Environmental Movements: Comparative Perspectives*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999.

MacPherson, Kerrie L. *Asian Department Stores*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998.

Morley, James W. *Driven By Growth: Political Change in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999.

CHINA AND TAIWAN

Ch'ing-wen, Cheng. *Three-Legged Horse*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Gardella, Robert, Jane K. Leonard and Andrea McElderry, eds. *Chinese Studies in History*. Spring/Summer 1998. vol. 31, nos. 3-4. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998.

Huang, Ray. *Broadening the Horizons of Chinese History: Discourses, Synthesis, and Comparisons*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999.

Landstrom, Elsie H. *Closing the Circle: An American Family in China*. Fort Bragg, California: QED Press, 1998.

Lu, Hanchao. *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Yun, Chi. *Shadows in a Chinese Landscape: The Notes of a Confucian Scholar*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999.

SOUTH ASIA

Jaffrelot, Christophe. *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

SOUTHEAST ASIA

Schafer, John C. *Vietnamese Perspectives on the War in Vietnam: An Annotated Bibliography of Works in English*. Yale University Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1997.

JAPAN

Graham, Patricia J. *Tea of the Sages: The Art of Sencha*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998.

Kita, Sandy. *The Last Tosa: Iwasa Katsumochi Matabei, Bridge to Ukiyo-e*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.

Martin, Peter. *The Chrysanthemum Throne: A History of the Emperors of Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

Princess Chichibu, Dorothy Britton (trans.). *The Silver Drum: A Japanese Memoir*. Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 1996.

Ropke, Ian Martin. *Historical Dictionary of Osaka and Kyoto*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999.

Winter, Kazuko. *Dear Ken-chan: A Letter to Japan*. Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 1996.

Yoshida, Yuki. *Whispering Leaves in Grosvenor Square, 1936-37*. Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 1997.

We find that understanding how Abhidhamma is related to meditation motivates the students in their Abhidhamma studies and make the learning more practical, therefore we start the course with this topic. By the end of this module a student should be able to understand in which ways Buddhist meditations are similar and different from other meditation systems, what kinds of different meditation techniques Theravada has to offer, where it leads to, and a general explanation of the ways of practice.