
Reviewed by

Damien Keown

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

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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 rūpakkhandha, and one of the first problems to be taken up is how to classify the senses. These are listed neither as part of the rūpakkhandha nor as part of the four arūpakkhandhas. 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 arūpakkhandhas, 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 saññākkhandha 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 contemporal 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 twelfefold 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 Therāgāthā 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 “conscience 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 Āṅguttara 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.