



Ven. Nyanaponika Thera. *Abhidhamma Studies: Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time*. Edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1998, xxviii + 145 pages, ISBN: 0-86171-135-1 (paperback), US \$16.95.

Reviewed by
Rupert Gethin
Senior Lecturer in Indian Religions
University of Bristol
Rupert.Gethin@bristol.ac.uk

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This book represents the fourth edition of a work originally published in Ceylon in 1949 as *Abhidhamma Studies: Researches in Buddhist Psychology*. A revised edition with an additional introductory chapter was then published by the Buddhist Publication Society (Kandy, Sri Lanka) in 1965, followed by a third edition (incorporating only minor corrections) in 1976. For this fourth edition the editor, Bhikkhu Bodhi, has reformulated a few awkward sentences[,] ... reorganized the notes, provided additional references, and supplied a bibliography. The subtitle has also been changed to provide a clearer idea of the book's contents (p. viii).

He has also prefaced the whole with a general introduction to the Abhidhamma (pp. vii–xxv).

The core of Nyanaponika's book consists of two essays that are essentially reflections on the account of the first kind of *kusala-citta* given in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* (Dhs), the first book of the Theravādin Abhidhamma. The first of these essays, "The List of Mental Constituents in the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*," discusses the various issues that arise from the manner in which Dhs defines the dhammas that constitute this first type of consciousness. The second essay, "The Problem of Time," focuses on some of the implications of the phrase "at a time when ..." (*yasmiṃ samaye ...*),

which Dhs uses to introduce each “arising of consciousness” (*cittuppāda*). In the characteristic style of the canonical Abhidhamma treatises, Dhs gives a full account only in the case of the first kind of consciousness, thereby indicating a scheme that can be applied to all other classes of consciousness. Thus, although Nyanaponika focuses on the Dhs account of the first class of consciousness, the themes he discusses in these two essays are in fact fundamental to the Dhs method.

Nyanaponika’s two core essays are prefaced by three shorter pieces: (1) “The Abhidhamma Philosophy: Its Estimation in the Past, Its Value for the Present,” which takes the form of a general introduction to the Abhidhamma and something of an apologia; (2) “The Twofold Method of Abhidhamma Philosophy,” which is a brief consideration of two fundamental methods of Abhidhamma, defined by Nyanaponika as “analysis [of phenomena]” and “investigating the relations ... of things” (p. 21); and (3) a bare outline of the Dhs account of the first class of consciousness. The book concludes with two short appendices, “The Authenticity of the *Anupada Sutta*” and “The Omission of Memory from the List of *Dhammas*.”

So what has changed in the field of Abhidhamma studies since Nyanaponika’s reflections were first published in 1949? How do the essays read fifty years later? One thing the intervening years have seen is an attempt to form a clearer picture of the development of Abhidharma/Abhidhamma literature, as illustrated by Erich Frauwallner’s “Abhidharma Studien,” originally published in German in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* between 1963 and 1973 and more recently published in English translation as *Studies in Abhidharma Literature and the Origins of Buddhist Philosophical Systems* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995). While Frauwallner seems overconfident in his suggested chronology for the evolution of Abhidharma literature, his studies do raise questions that cannot be completely bypassed by Nyanaponika’s own confidence in the superiority of the Theravādin lists of *dhammas* both as a description of psychological facts and as an authentic tradition stemming ultimately from the Buddha. Thus, while Nyanaponika convincingly shows that the Theravādin tradition attributes the function of memory to *saññā*, when he goes on to suggest that the Sarvāstivādin understanding of *smṛti* as universal to all consciousness represents a later “correction” born of a failure to understand the function of *saññā/saṃjñā* (pp. 119–123), one cannot help but feel that he is being a little unfair to the Sarvāstivādins, who after all define *smṛti/saṃjñā* in terms more or less identical to those of the Theravādins (see, for example, the *bhāṣya* to *Abhidharmakośa* II 24). The motives behind treating *smṛti* as a *caitta* universal to all consciousness rather than one exclusive to *kuśala* consciousness may have had more to do with

a wish on the part of the Sarvāstivādins to preserve the old Suttanta tradition of “wrong–mindfulness” (*micchā–sati*) than with the psychology of memory.

But the more important and significant aspect of Nyanaponika’s short book is the manner in which he indicates how we are to read canonical Abhidhamma texts: we have to learn to read the signs and follow the clues hidden in the endless and apparently meaningless repetitions. It seems that fifty years later this is still a lesson to be learned, as suggested in my review of *Abhidharma Buddhism to 150 A.D.* by Karl H. Potter et al. (in *Buddhist Studies Review* 16, pp. 91–97 [1999]). In fact, Nyanaponika’s book remains one of the few attempts to consider directly a portion of one of the basic books of the Theravādin canonical Abhidhamma. What he shows is that imbedded in the seemingly repetitive and uniform treatments of the various arisings of consciousness in Dhhs are various features and small variations that when interpreted reveal a deeper, more nuanced understanding than might at first be apparent from a cursory glance at the text. Perhaps one of the clearest and most important examples of this is Nyanaponika’s discussion of “Gradations of Intensity among Parallel Factors” (pp. 84–88), in which he shows how the text of Dhhs assumes various degrees of intensity of the same basic *dhamma* in different classes of consciousness. This is an interesting finding, though Nyanaponika is mistaken in stating (pp. 84–85, 89) that the features of Dhhs he discusses went unnoticed by the ancient Abhidhammikas (*Atthasālinī*, pp. 259, 264, 295). Following the basic clues set out by Nyanaponika, I have explored this topic further in *The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A Study of the Bodhipakkhiyā Dhammā* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992, pp. 143, 314–321).

Another important point that Nyanaponika makes concerns the very conception of what a *dhamma* is. There often appears to be an assumption in discussions of Abhidhamma/Abhidharma that all schools effectively understood *dhammas* in the same way, as some sort of inherently existing abstract phenomenon. But as Nyanaponika points out (pp. 40–41), the Pali definition of a *dhamma* as that which bears its own quality (*sabhāva*) has more to do with the denial of a “bearer” (or substance) separate from the quality than with questions of “inherent existence.” Certainly there have been a number of articles devoted to the ontology of *dhammas* according to the Vaibhāṣikas published since Nyanaponika first made his observations, and recently Y. Karunadasa published a brief study titled *The Dhamma Theory: Philosophical Cornerstone of the Abhidhamma* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996) dealing with further aspects of the Pali commentarial definition of a *dhamma*, yet we are still awaiting a philosophical study of the ontology of a *dhamma/dharma* that explores fully the

different concepts in the different schools.

In sum, given the lapse of time since the first publication of *Abhidhamma Studies*, perhaps the most striking thing is how little the field of Theravādin Abhidhamma studies has advanced. There are some interesting and important ideas here that still have a certain freshness about them. It is to be hoped that the publication of Nyanaponika's book in this new edition will stimulate further explorations of the Buddhist theories of consciousness and time that lie hidden in the works of the canonical Abhidhamma and its commentaries.