

Yuke Sirimane. *Entering the Stream to Enlightenment: Experiences of the Stages of the Buddhist Path in Contemporary Sri Lanka*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2016. (366pp)

Reviewed by Mark Leonard

In this book Sirimane compares the experience of accomplished Buddhist practitioners in Sri Lanka with ancient Buddhist texts. Her field research produces fascinating material which provides new understanding of the Buddhist Path and which, she finds, provides evidence for its authenticity. However, her work is built on assumptions that need to be examined with a critical eye.

Yesterday I gave a lift to a couple from deep in the Blackdown Hills on the Dorset-Somerset border to Birmingham. It was a ragtaggle gathering of three hundred or so assorted Buddhists, environmental activists, and mudlarks living in social bubbles experimenting with zero carbon footprint living.

Buddhafield Green Earth Awakening was blessed by the spirits of the four directions. The Dhamma burned through the morning mist of an Indian summer and shining under a hunters' moon at night, two and a half thousand years on, shaping new ways of applying its principles to the challenges of our times. A palpable sense of renewal was in the air.

It was a tribal gathering. There were workshops, discussions, pujas, neo-pagan ceremonies in the open air and under canvas stretched over geodesic domes. There were encounters around the fire accompanied by the songs of reborn hippy troubadours late into the night.

My companions on the journey to Birmingham embody the equanimity produced by Goenka style Vipassana practice. This system was designed to address the needs of another social context in another continent in another time. First to give new life to the Dhamma in colonial Burma when institutions of Sangha and State were crumbling under British rule, and then on to India in

a form accessible to modern educated Brahminical society. From India, the Dharma travelled on a new “silk road”, carried by hippies from East to West, the basket of the Dhamma shape-shifting at each turn to address the needs of the times.

Now, with the confluence of different tributaries rising in the lofty peaks of Asian Buddhist meditation styles, mindfulness meditation has become, among other things, the new caffeine of Silicon Valley, . There is increasing interest in what is actually going on when we pay attention to sensations of breathing, and increasing interest in what the Buddha actually thought and taught.

Meanwhile in Sri Lanka Yuke Sirimane has been exploring a fascinating question. She has gathered first hand accounts from persons, both monks and lay-practitioners, who are reputed to be Noble Persons. She has recorded their experiences, recounted to her in interviews, and looks for themes that seem to confirm their attaining stages of realisation on The Path.

As is proper, Sirimane must first define her terms: Noble Persons and Supramundane Fruits of the Path. There are eight categories of persons: Stream Enterers, Once-returners, Non-returners, Arahants, and those on the way to becoming Noble persons of each description. Most the field research examines the experiences of “Stream Enterers”. There is one interview with an individual who may be an “Arahant”.

Now I am writing in a seminar room in the Knowledge Hub of the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital, between mindfulness classes for NHS staff. This week’s class focuses on how posture affects the way we see ourselves in a social context and how this seems to be reflected in hormones and mood. A submissive posture seems to produce increased levels of stress hormones. A confident posture seems to produce increased levels of testosterone.

As social beings, a sense of threat is often related to the way we feel that people in positions of authority may be evaluating our performance. One example of how this can have a negative impact on the work we do is “sunk-cost bias”. We dedicate resources to a project and feel more and more committed to making it work. Costly projects may run over budget and fail to meet deadlines. The more we invest in a project the less willing we are to scrap it even if the cost-benefits move deeper and deeper into negative returns. Mindfulness has been found to make people better able to drop projects like these. With mindfulness, people are more prepared to appraise current conditions and make judgments based on what is actually happening rather than basing their judgments on an unrealistic hope and a prayer.

In a medical environment, this is particularly important in diagnosing a patient's condition. A practitioner comes to a diagnosis on the basis of their expertise. We invest in our judgments and subconsciously give less import to information that conflicts with our notions of what is going on. Our perception is selective and the more our sense of things is threatened, the less we notice. We resist change. It's only natural for a practitioner to register symptoms that confirm their diagnosis and pay less attention to indications that confound their expectations. Their reputation is built on their knowhow and a misdiagnosis becomes a threat to their sense of self. This sense of threat further impairs their ability to notice what is actually going on and compounds the tendency to fall prey to what is termed "confirmation bias".

It therefore makes sense to work with posture. In many meditation styles, it is thought to be important to sit in an upright posture. This upright posture then will have an effect on hormones. A posture that produces a sense of confidence will not only reduce the activity of the mind and produce a calming effect in meditation, it will reduced the sense of the risks of getting things wrong. This helps people to be more aware of what is actually going on and helps people to adapt to changing conditions more responsibly and so reduce the effects of cognitive bias.

The practice of developing mindfulness clearly has benefits in terms of more skilful action in society, but where might this practice lead? Perhaps understanding more about the origins of this practice in a Buddhist context will help us to answer this question.

Sirimane derives her definitions from the *Visuddhimagga*, which was compiled in Sri Lanka by a fifth century monk, Buddhaghosa, to elucidate a systematic "Path of Purification", and from source material from the Pali Canon. Buddhaghosa's work aimed to summarise the Tripitaka almost 900 years after the Buddha's living teachings were delivered to the inhabitants of Northern India. His work is described as "the hub of a complete and coherent method of exegesis of the Tipitaka, using the 'Abhidhamma method' as it is called. And it sets out detailed practical instructions for developing purification of mind." (Bhikkhu Nyanamoli 2011 p. xxvii.)

Sirimane's work, comparing descriptions of development in ancient texts with living experience, is significant not least because of the challenges of doing such research. In a Buddhist context, many are reluctant to relate personal experiences, as this can be seen as self-promotion; besides, the accounts may even become objects of attachment to themselves or to others seeking similar

attainments. (Thus the suspected Arahant talks to Sirimane only because his teacher asks him to do so.) Sirimane recognises this and other potential difficulties in her field research, many of which must be comparable to any qualitative study of this kind. However, she may be unaware of what may be the greatest potential bias that the whole project is subject to. She is Sri Lankan and a member of the Samatha Trust. Her sense of identity, personal, spiritual and national, is wrapped up in this study.

Notwithstanding this potential for bias, Sirimane comes to what I believe is a very significant conclusion. Her interviewees all describe specific “fetter-breaking” peak experiences that act as milestones on the way to becoming Noble Persons and subsequent attainment of Supramundane Fruits of the Path. She identifies a further requirement of soteriological development: that the peak experience be later conceptually framed in terms that comply with that stage of progression along the path as identified in source texts. The peak experience then is passed, but its after effect and its conceptual framing then produce the stage of attainment. The memory of the peak experience in the context of its conceptual framing then becomes firmly fixed in the mind of the Noble Person and so penetrates every aspect of their being.

Could it be that all that we are seeing in this study is a set of experiences predicted by the model of development as it is understood and practised? Are the very experiences described and recorded just the product of the construction of the path as it is taught in a particular social context? Perhaps we should not be so concerned about this as an object of academic curiosity or even from a personal perspective as a Buddhist. What is of much greater social significance is how this framing of the Dhamma is dependent on its re-reading at different times and in different social contexts.

I have always been quite suspicious of what seems to me to be a nihilistic interpretation of the Dhamma: that the intention of practice is to stem the operation of higher functions of the human mind by habituating the nervous system to deconstructing experience down to elements of sensory input. On this interpretation, ability to do this in all circumstances seems to be exactly what defines an Arahant.

On my journey with my companions from the Blackdown Hills to Birmingham, I pressed them to describe what they learned on their Vipassana courses. I said I had heard the story of the dependent origination of experience many times before. What was it that was really going on for them? What is “ultimately real”, my new friend said, was the process involved and the sensory experience.

My friend could not tell me why reducing experience to perception of sensory input was different from the experience of an animal. They had posited a reality in the process of deconstruction of their personality reducing self to sensory experience in order to escape from existential pain. This, I believe, is the danger of trying to understand the Dhamma from a modernist perspective, and it goes back at least as far as the origins of the practices as they are taught today in Sri Lanka.

This process is often described by an analogy: “There is no wood, there are only trees.” This analogy is said to help practitioners to understand that deconstructing self enables them to be free of the existential suffering that arises from a constructed sense of self. However, I believe this view is only, at best, half the story and that it fails *to see the wood for the trees*.

What is left, after the experiential sense of self that we cling to has been completely lost? It is not until the final section in the penultimate chapter of Sirimane’s book, which concerns her sole interview with a suspected Arahant, that the subject of compassion is mentioned. But where does this compassion actually arise from if the sense of self is gone? Of course, this is not the first time this question has been asked!

The standard explanation goes something along the following lines: Once a person thoroughly deconstructs the process of creating the self, they are free from the suffering created by it. Then they are grateful to the Buddha for the Dhamma that has liberated them from suffering and grateful to the Sangha for support along the way, for which some vestigial remnant of self is required. Then, seeing the suffering of other beings, they wish to teach the Dhamma to alleviate their suffering also: the vestigial remnant of self is generating empathy for the illusion of a self.

If we are Buddhists, we may believe this theory. If we are academics, we may find it an interesting subject for research. However, with the growing interest in mindfulness in contemporary society, there is a far more significant issue at stake. Can a critical understanding of Buddhist practice help us to find ways of changing society to shape a world in which the threat to survival of future generations is reduced. If we don’t find new ways of living together and of relating to the natural resources that sustain life on this planet, our collective extinction is a real possibility.

We have evolved as social apes whose survival is dependent on our ability to cooperate. Our individual survival is dependent on our ability to build mutually supportive relationships with others in a group, but our success comes from

our ability for abstract thought and language. With this ability we create new technology, stories of who we are and how we relate to each other within a group. As a group we create a culture in which we enact our lives and shape the world around us.

Whatever we see, we seek to comprehend from the perspectives that have shaped us. Because of our power to make the abstract real, disentangling the real and meaningful from the imaginary and fantastic becomes profoundly significant, not least in the way we recreate the Dhamma in different places and different times. It is this overview that Sirimane and many others, at least since colonial times and quite probably as early as Buddhaghosa, have failed to recognise in their attempt, each in their time, to understand, apply and preserve the Dhamma.

So what is the relevance of Sirimane's findings today? We appear to be witnessing early stirrings of a social revolution that has been precipitated by the Dhamma's most up-to-date tool-kit, which has emerged to meet the needs of society today – *mindfulness*. Sirimane describes “fetter-breaking” peak experiences that, with reflection, lead to progress along the path. This observation seems to make a great deal of sense, but how are we to understand this in a contemporary context?

This is an important question, not only due to the increasing number of people engaging in the practice but also because we need better to understand its potential implications for society. There are two questions here: What is going on in the individual, and how then does this interact with social change?

On an individual level, contemporary understanding of the mechanisms of mindfulness have been shaped by cognitive therapy. Redirecting attention to sensory experience has a number of therapeutic benefits that seem to fit quite well with a modern Buddhist understanding of Insight Meditation. This enables a person to disengage from unhelpful or unrealistic ideas and thinking; it opens the gate to experientially based insight into the way thoughts and emotions shape our lives. This gives us a degree of autonomy to choose not to cultivate unhelpful or unrealistic beliefs and the moods they precipitate. Even engaging in short mindfulness meditation practices can produce profound changes; but there are also reports of damaging effects of more intense regimes like the Goenka version of Vipassana retreats.

What is lacking is an understanding of how the simple practice of paying attention to sensory experience has these results and what, if any, is the function of the Brahma Viharas? A psychological understanding may well be

part of the story, but what is going on in the body when beliefs change as a result of direct experience? How do these changes then precipitate “fetter-breaking” experiences? Sirimane explains the importance of a conceptual framing of the experience as a defining characteristic of the Noble Person but hardly mentions compassion!

Perhaps we can better understand this process by recognising that the self-construct becomes imprinted on physiology as a result of a complex series of processes. Hormonal states produced by prevailing moods and emotional reactivity result in epigenetic change at a cellular level. Neuroplastic change in the brain takes place as a result of patterns of thinking and behaviour. Activity and diet have an effect. And all of these processes are shaped by how we see ourselves – the self-construct – in relation to others.

When the self-construct is deconstructed in Insight Meditation, the force that shapes the embodied imprint is released and physiological homeostatic processes of the “organism” return to normal function. The physiological regeneration and neuroplastic change that takes place as a result of this process produces changing body states and changes in perception and cognition that are experienced subjectively. These changes then may precipitate peak experiences, that Surimane identifies as “fetter breaking experiences”, and long-term shifts in cognition and perception which follow: Supramundane Fruits of the Path.

Of key significance here is sensitivity to internal body states that reflect a more equanimous mind state with low mental activity. Sensitivity to this “base state” takes place via afferent function of the ancient and primitive portion of the vagus nerve, which informs the central nervous system of changes in visceral function that take place as a result of changing states of arousal. When we settle into a relaxed state a number of things take place; digestive organs function; biochemical processing in the liver takes place, removing toxins etc; breathing settles into a rhythm and Heart Rate Variability becomes optimal.

Recent research has begun to understand the function of thin films of connective tissue, the fascia, which hold all of the soft tissue of the body in place. As well as literally “holding us together” the fascia also act as a simple vascular system that enables lymph to remove waste products from bundles of muscle fibres, which they hold together. Stiffness in the body is associated with reduced elasticity and malformation of fascia which impairs their vascular function and can cause pain.

These translucent layers of connective tissue also act as a sense organ. There are as many nerve endings in the fascia as there are in the eyes. The fascia are our “internal eyes”. They tell us where the hand is when we scratch an itch in the dark. They tell us about our posture, and this informs the central nervous system of our social status, and then the central nervous system instructs the endocrine system to regulate hormone levels to reflect our social status and so our self-image. Developing interoception (awareness of internal body states - a “sense-base” not identified by the Buddha but potentially described as Mindfulness of Body) and increased sensitivity to body-based experience that take place as a result of Insight Meditation (also known as mindfulness) may play a significant role in how the practitioner is affected.

How do the Brahma Viharas fit in? From a psychological perspective, developing a sense of ease is only possible when a person feels safe. In the Tradition, this sense of safety is afforded by the support of the community of Monks and Nuns. Here, the role of the Sangha is only made possible by almsgiving by the lay community, and the practitioner co-opts prosocial mind-states – kindness, compassion and empathetic joy – as the means to establish equanimity in the service of the ultimate goal of Nibbana.

In our evolution we have gained this sense of safety in a social group that ensures our individual survival. We have developed an advanced capacity for abstract thought shaped by language. We have developed a sense of self that relates to others, the social group and our environment, and this imaginary world has become the window of our experience. We have survived individually and collectively by developing complex relationships with our companions that enable us to co-operate and share resources according to daily need.

As society has evolved we have needed to create increasingly well-defined symbolic references of self and how these relate to others within increasingly complex social structures. It was when agrarian technology provided a food surplus, so that society and language developed in Northern India, that the Buddha taught there. We could say that the whole of the path he taught was to counteract the trend towards the construction of a new sense of self that arose out of these conditions. If so, how do we understand the world-view that informs Surimane’s study and its implications in contemporary society?

I suggest the answer to this question lies in understanding self as socially constructed. From this perspective it then becomes possible to evaluate the framework of commonly held assumptions about the Buddha’s teachings, which shape Sirimane’s perspectives, her methodology and her findings in a way that is relevant to contemporary society.

The self-construct acts in various ways to acquire the resources needed to ensure the organism's survival. However, satisfying this need is entirely dependent on a person's ability to be valued by others in the community. As population density has grown, the social self has had to become increasingly well defined and with this process it has sought to project its need for safety by establishing its position in an increasingly stratified social structure.

Where resources are distributed unequally and privilege accompanies high social status, the weak are disadvantaged and the strong have to protect their gains. Social inequity drives competitive self-interest and individualism. Stress produced under these social conditions creates increasing levels of self-definition, individualistic motivation and strategic manoeuvring to acquire status, which devalue cooperative and pro-social behaviour and select for sociopathic traits.

Deconstructing the self with mindfulness then can be used to diffuse the existential suffering that is produced, but this technique can also be used as a means to diffuse the distress caused by perceiving the suffering of others. Then mindfulness becomes a means of maintaining the status quo, and one could then argue that the stress on the ideal of the Arahant, who has taken The Path to its logical end, becomes the keystone of a patriarchal State Buddhism. Surimane's study is not the first time that there has been an attempt to understand Buddhist practice from a rationalistic perspective which, intentionally or otherwise, may act in the service of these ends.

This trend towards seeking scientific validation for Buddhist thinking and practice has shaped the Tradition at least since colonial times. Sirimane's study appears to follow this trajectory in the service of contemporary Theravada Buddhist identity. However, this does not mean that we should not employ empirical methodologies to study the tradition: we just need to do it better.

The problem arises when we see the self as an internal subjective process. The development of the modern sense of self has come from an idea that subjective experience is an individual process. This is closely linked to the notion that natural selection operates at an individual level and all complex phenomena can be understood by defining the parts which function together. This way of thinking has shaped the idea of the nation state and defined the way Buddhism has been understood, becoming a state religion in Buddhist countries.

This modernistic perspective, which may well go back to Buddhaghosa's time, creates the idea of a separate spiritual realm of experience and downplays the importance of social engagement. Was this really the Buddha's intention? If mindfulness in today's society is not just going to be a tool that supports the status quo by enabling people to cope with the stress of modern life and which

is creating dangerously unstable levels of social inequity and destroying the planet's life support systems, we need to find a way of finding a social antidote to the social forces that are creating the problems humanity faces today. Here the need is not to escape rebirth by snuffing out the burning fire of self-construction, it is to evolve a self-construct that can engage in skilful action to make a better world with others.

Can mindfulness in contemporary society become the bridge between deconstructing the causes of a sick psychology and constructing a foundation for secular ethics based on a greater awareness of our socially embodied experience? If so, the practice of mindfulness in contemporary society will need to be re-evaluated in social terms. This will involve extracting it from its use as a value free intervention that acts to correct stress related psychopathology expressed on an individual by individual basis. From a Buddhist perspective, this will also require reviewing the prominent rationale for its practice as an individual soteriological endeavour. The Brahma Viharas need to be understood as a driving force to construct a pro-social self framed within an understanding of how we construct self socially and how this self changes in different social contexts to make Buddhism relevant in a modern world. Buddhists then need to find a way of explaining how equanimity arises out of a sense of embodied meaning and purpose in society, not as a means of escaping it.