

Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses. By Bhikkhu Anālayo. Onalaska: Pariyatti Publishing. 2012. v + 326 pp. ISBN: 978-1-928706-98-4.

Apart from the two-page introduction, the table of contents, the list of abbreviations, the bibliography, and the index, the bulk of *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses* is comprised of “revised versions of entries originally published in the Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Sri Lanka” (p. 1). Accordingly, the book does not present a connected narrative which introduces the Pāli discourses and progressively builds towards one or more conclusions about those discourses or the “thought-world” we encounter in them. Rather, in keeping with its origins, the main part of the book consists of twenty-four chapters which “can be read in whatever sequence the reader may prefer” (p. 2). The topic of each freestanding chapter is indicated by its title. A partial list of topics covered includes: “Craving”, “Grasping”, “Personality View”, “Volitional Formations”, “Contemplation of feelings”, “Happiness”, “Knowledge and Vision according to Reality”, “Wise Attention”, “Insight”, and “Liberation”. These are translations of Pāli terms, which are also given in the chapter titles.

To give an example, Chapter 3 is titled “Passion / *Rāga*”. The chapter begins with a short commentary on the meaning of the Pāli term *rāga*, in which Bhikkhu Anālayo explains that *rāga* stands for “lust” or “passion” (p. 39), the latter being the author’s preferred translation. Bhikkhu Anālayo notes that “passion is one of the fundamental defilements recognized in early Buddhism” (p. 39), buttressing his explanation of how we are to understand *rāga* by drawing on the work of his illustrious predecessor Ñāṇaponika. After this brief introduction, the remainder of the chapter consists of three sections: “The Nature of Passion” (pp. 39-44), “The Removal of Passion” (pp. 44-45), and “Passion and Dispassion” (pp. 45-53). In these and most of the other essays which make up the main part of the book, Bhikkhu Anālayo deploys uncomplicated prose and a knack for marshalling evidence to illuminate the topic under discussion. The following excerpt from “The Removal of Passion” (pp. 44-45) gives a flavor of the book as a whole:

Compared with “anger”, *dosa*, passion is less blameable, though it takes longer to be overcome (AN I 200). The arising of passion can be traced to two main conditions: the “sign of beauty”, *subhanimitta*, often attributed to the physical body of the other gender, and “unwise attention”, *ayoniso manasikāra* (AN I 87). The obvious counter

method, therefore, is wise attention to the less appealing aspects of the body, examining its anatomical constitution and the unattractive nature of its parts (AN III 323). Additional counter strategies include developing restraint of the senses, contentment with food, wakefulness and mindfulness together with clear comprehension (AN IV 166).

In order to ensure that one's mind is not overwhelmed by passion, recollection of the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha* can be undertaken (AN III 286). From among the four divine abodes, *brahmavihāra*, the meditative development of equanimity... stands out as an "escape", *nissaraṇa*, from passion (DN III 249).

These passages indicate that the development of mental tranquillity, *samatha*, can also function as an antidote to passion. This point is made explicitly in a discourse... (AN I 61).

This excerpt is illustrative of an important feature found throughout the book. It is that when Bhikkhu Anālayo sets out to illuminate a term or topic, he tends to anchor his comments – if not every sentence then at least a large proportion of them – to a passage in a Pāli text. The Pāli texts mostly cited are "early Pāli discourses" (p. 1). Other sources such as "later Pāli works, Chinese parallels, or secondary publications" are considered "only in a supplementary fashion" (p. 1). In some of the book's essays the density of references to Pāli texts is not as high as in the above example, but even in those cases references to Pāli texts are still relatively plentiful. One effect achieved by constantly citing Pāli texts in this way is that the author of *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses* often recedes into the background, and what emerges into the foreground of the reader's consciousness is an impression of a large – and for many it will be a largely convincing – web of references whereby the Pāli discourses readily seem to explain themselves.

Another important aspect of *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses* can perhaps be discerned in what is said in the excerpt above, and in how it is said. Also important is what Bhikkhu Anālayo does not say, but this dimension of his art will be more appreciated by those who already have some familiarity with the Pāli discourses. The aspect of the book to which I am referring is the manner in which the author assembles his material and shapes his mes-

sage, and I believe that the author is not wrong when he speaks of the book's suitability for "those who approach Buddhism as a system of mental development" (p. 2). That is to say, *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses* seems to be oriented more towards readers seeking textual grounding with respect to Buddhist-style mental development than it is towards those readers who approach the study of Buddhism or Pāli texts from a more historical or academic perspective. Bhikkhu Anālayo himself puts the matter somewhat differently, saying that he has tried to adapt the book for "the general readership" and present "material of practical interest" – hopefully in a way that does not sacrifice "academic rigour" (p. 2). The book's large payload of Pāli vocabulary and text citations make it unusual among books on Buddhist teachings which are designed for "the general readership". Bhikkhu Anālayo is to be commended for producing a book that backs up claims about Buddhist teachings by constant and direct appeal to the incomparable Pāli discourses, and there can be no doubt that many readers will enjoy and benefit from this admirable work.

But for all the book's positive qualities, this reviewer cannot avoid expressing a certain degree of dissatisfaction with *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses*. To my mind the Pāli discourses, besides being incomparable sources for understanding early Buddhist teachings, are an inexhaustible and priceless treasure of wisdom and culture from the ancient world. Like the dialogues of Plato or the New Testament, the Pāli discourses will not be adequately systematized. They abound in obscurities, curiosities, and references that we probably cannot now reasonably hope to understand – just as surely as they hold important but neglected pieces of information which still await "discovery" in the modern era. There are real or apparent contradictions in these texts, as well as beauty and sound advice, but they also convey a message whose full implications are both terrible and sublime. Should a series of excursions into the Pāli discourses and their "thought-world" not expose the voyager to the wonders of these texts, and teach him or her to appreciate them, rather than simply sampling the discourses for a set of doctrinal warrants? To this reviewer's way of thinking, Bhikkhu Anālayo's book inclines too much to the latter.

Let us also consider Bhikkhu Anālayo's statement to the effect that in this book his emphasis is on "exploring" particular terms "from the perspective of the early Pāli discourses" (p. 1). As readers we can appreciate an author's statement of intention, even as we question it. Are we to understand that the early Pāli discourses have only one perspective? Bhikkhu Anālayo makes a valiant effort to

show us just what that one perspective of the early Pāli discourses is on a variety of topics, and as mentioned above, the main and well-crafted impression one gets from the book is that the early Pāli discourses are magnificently clear and internally self-reinforcing documents which perhaps really do speak with one voice. Now I do not deny that Pāli discourses often support one another, and that they can be, and often are, straightforward. I simply wonder if things are always as neat and clear as they appear to be according to Bhikkhu Anālayo. Curiosity led me to test some explanatory statements drawn from the book at random. The very first statement I picked for this purpose comes from “Living in Seclusion” (p. 259):

To set an example was in fact a prominent reason why the Buddha would live in seclusion himself, in addition to the pleasure he found in secluded dwellings (MN I 23 and AN I 60).

The wording is confident, even authoritative, and typical of Bhikkhu Anālayo’s approach to the subject matter: among other things he is going to mine the Pāli discourses and come up with the “facts” about what happened so many centuries ago. But as it turns out, neither of the Pāli texts cited in the above statement actually says anything about setting an example. Here is what the relevant passage at MN I 23 does say (Pāli text according to the Burmese Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka edition):

Dve kho ahaṃ, brāhmaṇa, atthavase sampassamāno araññavana-patthāni pantāni senāsanāni paṭisevāmi – attano ca ditṭhadhamma-sukhavihāraṃ sampassamāno, pacchimañca janataṃ anukampamāno ti.

Seeing two reasons, Brahmin, I frequent forests and jungle groves, secluded places to sit and lie in. I am seeing a pleasant dwelling in this very life, for myself, and I am showing compassion for later generations of people.

The passage at AN I 60 is much the same, but in it the Buddha speaks to monks, first asking and then answering his own rhetorical question. Neither passage mentions setting an example. Neither passage says why the Buddha’s residing in a secluded place is supposed to be compassionate. I certainly would like to know the real significance of the phrase *pacchimañca janataṃ anukampamāno*, “and I am showing compassion for later generations of people”. Probably many other readers would too. But we must accept the limitations of the texts and our situation. It may or may not be true that the historical Buddha reckoned he was being

compassionate by setting an example of residing in a secluded place, because this would motivate others to reside in a secluded place, which would benefit them. But this is not the perspective of either text cited as we have it. It is, rather, the perspective of the commentarial tradition, and it is the commentarial tradition on which Bhikkhu Anālayo apparently has drawn, without saying so, in making the explanatory statement above.

This little irregularity does nothing to diminish my respect for Bhikkhu Anālayo's many achievements in this book and elsewhere. It merely serves to illustrate the truth of what critics so often have said about Pāli texts and the Theravāda Buddhist tradition: that when it comes to explaining the Pāli discourses, what they contain and what they mean, and what their significance to us can be, the representatives of the Theravāda tradition are not above sometimes confusing what their tradition says the Pāli discourses mean with what the texts actually say.

I am happy to report that some of the book's other explanatory statements were, upon investigation, entirely unproblematic. But then I came across the following (p. 159):

According to the *Bodhirājakumāra-sutta*, before his awakening the Buddha himself had accepted the belief common in ancient India that all pleasures have to be shunned in order to be able to reach liberation (MN II 93).

The claims in this statement could have been broken up into discrete units, but that is not how the author gives them to us: we must take them as a whole. Now on the basis of that part of MN II 93 which is incorporated by reference from the *Mahāsaccaka-sutta*, and perhaps that part of MN II 93 which is incorporated by reference from the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*, it is possible to claim that Gotama before his awakening, i.e., the character as he appears in the Pāli texts, believed that all pleasures have to be shunned in order to be able to reach liberation – but not that this idea was “common in ancient India”. I think however that Bhikkhu Anālayo may be referring to a belief which in MN II 93 a character called Prince Bodhi says that he holds, and which the Buddha says that he himself once held (and which the Buddha at MN I 93 attributes to a band of Nigaṇṭhas). This belief is: *na kho sukkena sukhaṃ adhigantabbaṃ dukkhena kho sukhaṃ adhigantabbaṃ*. One straightforward translation of this could be: “Not by happiness is happiness to be attained; happiness is to be attained by pain”. If this is the basis for the statement above – and I see no other reason to cite MN II

93 – then this, by itself, would not be enough to support all the claims made in the above statement. My problem is that despite having tried in good faith, I cannot clearly see the basis in MN II 93 for those claims.

Another source of dissatisfaction with this book is that it pays too little attention, for my taste, to the cultural context which informed the creation of the Pāli discourses. Not every book to do with Buddhism must be a treatise on Indian religious and cultural history; I suppose it is possible to understand basic Buddhist teachings without any knowledge of the religious and cultural history of the sub-continent. But I cannot see how it is possible to venture into the Pāli discourses and appreciate them in any meaningful way without such knowledge. It is one thing to know that the Pāli discourses say this or that. It is another thing to come to grips with the extent to which the “thought-world” of the Pāli discourses does or does not overlap with the “thought-world” of other ancient but non-Buddhist Indian texts. It is a weakness of *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses*, in my opinion, that it does not do more to impart knowledge of and inculcate a respect for context. It is true “ancient India” is mentioned some six times in the 305 pages which make up the main part of the book, so that from time to time the reader is reminded that the Pāli discourses come from an actual time and place. But this is too little, too late. Without an adequate introduction, the book plunges into an examination of terms and ideas which make it seem as if the early Buddhist teachings – to use the words a prominent critic once used – “resonate autonomously in timelessness”.¹ What one thinks of *that* idea will probably determine what one thinks of *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses*.

If the title of the book were different – perhaps *Excursions into the Thought-World of Buddhist Terms and Ideas Taken from the Pāli Discourses as They are Understood by the Theravāda Tradition* – I probably would not be making these complaints. But as it stands, potential readers of the book Bhikkhu Anālayo has written (or any book that purports to discuss Buddhist teachings and Pāli texts) may want to keep some of the above points in mind, because unless one is reading the Pāli text for oneself, and in a way that is sensitive to context, one can never be quite sure whose thought-world one is entering.

In spite of the criticisms expressed above, I believe that *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pāli Discourses* is a worthwhile book which deserves consideration. More than that I believe that excursions into the Pāli discourses ought

¹ Gombrich, R. (1992) *The Buddha's Book of Genesis?* Indo-Iranian Journal 35, pp. 159-178.

to be undertaken by anyone interested in Buddhism, the ancient world, ancient philosophy, ancient religions, Indian culture and history, or related subjects. If one is in need of a companion on the journey, Bhikkhu Anālayo makes for an agreeable guide. Much of what he has to say in this book is neither obviously true nor obviously untrue, and that – by prompting a closer examination of the Pāli discourses themselves – makes his book worth reading.²

Brett Shults
Independent Researcher
Hong Kong

²Adapted from a line by Kraut, R. (2008) *How to Read Plato*. Granta.