

*Entering the Stream to Enlightenment: Experiences of the Stages of the Buddhist Path in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, by Yuki Sirimane. Equinox Publishing, 2016. 366pp. Hb. £75.00, ISBN-13: 9781781792032; Pb. £24.99, ISBN-13: 9781781792049.

Reviewed by Pyi Phyo Kyaw, King's College London, pyi.kyaw@kcl.ac.uk

This multidisciplinary book is unusual in that it combines a textual approach with field research, exploring the nature of the Theravāda Buddhist religious experience of the four supramundane stages of the Noble Eightfold Path in contemporary Sri Lanka, with a focus on the nature and experiences of stream-entry, the first of these four stages. In this manner, Yuki Sirimane helpfully elucidates how meditative and religious experiences of a noble person (*ariya-puggala*) and their supramundane attainments can be evaluated against early Buddhist texts, i.e. the discourses (*sutta*) from the first four *Nikāyas* of the Pāli canon. While there are many contemporary studies, in which interviews and various field research approaches are used – for example in disciplines such as Contemplative Science and Contemplative Neuroscience, on the nature and effects of meditation in general, or mindfulness-based meditation in particular – the current book examines an awkward and understudied feature of the Theravāda religious experiences: the experiential aspects of practitioners from a perspective of the faithful. Sirimane's study of experiences of the stages of the Buddhist path in contemporary Sri Lanka is, therefore, a very welcome contribution to Buddhist Studies.

The book is divided into eight chapters, with three appendices that cover excerpts from and some commentary on the interviews. Chapter one sets out the author's research aims, methodology, difficulties encountered during fieldwork, definitions of key terms used in the book, as well as a rather detailed outline of the subsequent chapters (pp. 24–29). The second chapter discusses the possibilities and difficulties in recognizing a noble person. She proposes means to evaluate the authenticity of the claims made by her interviewees, suggesting, for example, that a reasonable yardstick for a stream-enterer is absence of the first three fetters: i.e. 'a view on personality' (*sakkāya-dīṭṭhi*), 'skeptical doubt' (*vicikicchā*) and 'clinging to rules and vows' (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) (pp. 25 and 48–49). Based on the Pāli *Nikāyas*, contemporary sources on the supramundane experiences of meditators – such as works by Ajahn Chah of the Thai tradition – and her own field research, chapter three explores whether attainment of a supramundane fruit (*phala*) entails a specific experience, which Sirimane calls 'fetter-breaking-experience', and concludes that it does. Chapter four proposes that 'path, fetter-breaking-experience, and effect (of the fetter-breaking-experience)' as three different phenomena, rather than 'path and its fruits' as suggested in the *Visuddhimagga*. Sirimane also draws out various implications of her thesis with reference to modern scholarly debates surrounding the nature of *nibbāna*, i.e. whether or not *nibbāna* is a transcendent reality and

---

Keywords: Buddhist religious experience, stream-entry, Sri Lanka, supramundane fruits, Theravāda meditation

is ineffable, and argues that such debates arise as ‘a result of not recognizing the sequence of “Path, fetter-breaking-experience, and effect”’ (p. 83).

A very useful, detailed analysis of the nature of different types of fetter-breaking-experiences and their respective effects is provided in chapter five, especially pp. 90–100. Here Sirimane also explores the nature of ‘fruition attainment’ (*phala-samāpatti*) and of ‘cessation attainment’ (*nirodha-samāpatti*), which could be regarded as how a noble person re-experiences their own attainment of a supramundane fruit. Chapter six is a detailed evaluation of the attainment of ‘the fruit that is stream-entry’ (*sotāpatti-phala*), looking at the nature and conduct of a stream-enterer as well as other very interesting topics related to stream-entry, such as the possibility of stream-enterers being reborn in the human world and whether they could commit suicide. She provides textual evidence (pp. 164–167) that it is possible for lay people to attain stream-entry and continue in lay life until at least the stage of non-returning. It would have been good to have here included some discussion on the debate surrounding lay *arahantship*. Chapter seven, entitled ‘An Interview with a “Possible Arahant”’, gives relevant extracts from the interview under a given topic and compares them with textual evidence from the Pāli *Nikāyas* that describes the mindset of an *arahant*. It is not clear why she conducted this interview with the ‘possible *arahant*’ in English given that there was a language barrier between them. Perhaps it might have been good to have a translator, which could have improved the quality of the interview process as well as the reliability of the data. Chapter eight offers her conclusions of the study: commonalities amongst her interviewees with regards to experiences and knowledge, as well as how they perceive their attainments of supramundane fruits; critiques of contemporary applications of mindfulness meditation in therapeutic contexts and modern teachings of the Dhamma as one of the reasons for confusion and debates about the Buddhist religious experience. Here she proposes ‘a simpler approach to the Path’ (pp. 208–210), and future research.

While the research methodology of the author’s fieldwork (pp. 8–9) is clearly explained and is sound – as it uses multilayered interviews, including questionnaires – Sirimane does not explain explicitly why the textual study exclusively relies on the first four Pāli *Nikāyas*. She seems to have taken Warder’s comments on the authenticity of the *Tipitaka* to the letter, to such an extent that her textual study is done ‘to the exclusion of the commentaries and the *Visuddhimagga*’ (p. 7). Despite this, Sirimane does occasionally include relevant passages from the *Visuddhimagga* with an aim ‘to highlight the controversies and debates about the nature of the religious experiences’ (p. 7). Her arguments and conclusions go beyond this aim, attributing to the later texts such as the *Visuddhimagga* a reason for modern debates and confusion because commentators, she claims, ‘introduced technical terms and classifications which are not found in the Suttas’ (p. 206). While I, from the perspective of a meditator, agree with her point that the commentaries and other later texts as well as some modern Theravāda meditation systems tend to overcomplicate the approach to the Buddhist soteriological goal, I wish to point out that the issue on the whole is more sophisticated than having a simpler approach to the

path. First, one way to view the developments of the geographically and textually diverse Theravāda traditions that we see today is through the lens of a Buddhist history developed over the last two millennia, which I would have thought could add interesting dynamics to the whole discussion of the nature and experiences of the stages of the Buddhist path, rather than viewing them as ‘deviations from the practice laid down in the texts [which] distract a practitioner and takes her further and further away from the goal of the Dhamma (*sic*)’ (207). Given that Sirimane makes comparative comments about Burmese practice in this context, it could have been useful to contextualize why some modern Burmese meditation traditions such as Mahasi and Pa Auk follow Abhidhammic texts such as the *Visuddhimagga* quite strictly. (See Erik Braun’s *The Birth of Insight: Meditation, Modern Buddhism, and the Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw*, University of Chicago Press, 2013, chapter 4, and Pyi Phyo Kyaw’s ‘*Paṭṭhāna* (Conditional Relations) in Burmese Buddhism’, PhD Thesis, King’s College London, 2014, chapter 2.)

The second issue concerns a dilemma that a practitioner may face: on the one hand there is a case for having the relevant technical knowledge to be able to identify and fully understand a particular experience (e.g. see pp. 79–80 and 202–203), and then there are dangers of having too much theoretical knowledge about the stages of the Buddhist path and its fruits and the technical details of practice, such as different levels of *jhāna*. The latter could lead to what Sirimane calls ‘projecting’ *nibbāna* or supramundane fruits, rather than ‘attaining’ them (p. 207). There are some Theravāda meditation traditions that highlight the dangers of having too much textual knowledge for one’s practice. For instance, the cases of two Burmese meditation masters, namely Sunlun Sayadaw Ven. Kavi (1878–1952) and Theinngu Sayadaw Ven. Ukkaṭṭha (1912–1973) not only show that the deficiency of knowledge does not impair one’s attainments and destiny, but also highlight obstacles that theoretical knowledge may create for the meditating mind. Both Sunlun and Theinngu Sayadaws, who are known as *arahants*, were barely literate and thus did not have any textual knowledge. In addition, they did not have any formal teachers. Through their own meditation technique and practice, i.e. heavy, rhythmic, fast breathing, many Burmese Theravādins consider them to have reached the final goal of *nibbāna*. According to Theinngu Sayadaw, theoretical knowledge may create obstacles for one’s practice and progress on the path, in that one may imagine ‘knowing’ the Dhamma intellectually to be ‘seeing’ it experientially. On dangers of theory-based meditation practice, see Pyi Phyo Kyaw’s ‘The *Paṭṭhāna* (Conditional Relations) and Buddhist Meditation (<http://www.undv.org/vesak2012/iabudoc/07PyiPhyoKyawFINAL.pdf>).

There are two other areas where the discussion could have been enhanced. The debate of whether or not *nibbāna* is a transcendental reality could have engaged with the late Lance Cousins’ article ‘*Nibbāna* and Abhidhamma’, *Buddhist Studies Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1983–4: 95–109. Giving voice to her interviewees’ views would have enriched the elucidation of certain modern developments and controversies, such as secular mindfulness. The book could also have benefitted from closer editing and organization. Some sections such as the detailed outline of the chapters

on pages 24–29 are repeated verbatim in later chapters. Other sections have paragraphs or quotations from the *suttas* or the interviews that are not directly relevant or integrated into the overall prose, making it unnecessarily confusing. These points notwithstanding, this is an innovative and welcome contribution to the field.