Religions of South Asia 10.1 (2016) 115–117
doi:10.1558/rosa.32699

ISSN (print) 1751-2689
ISSN (online) 1751-2697

Review

Rethinking the Buddha: Early Buddhist Philosophy as Meditative Perception, by Eviatar Shulman. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xviii + 206 pp., $85.50 (hb). ISBN 978-1-107-06239-9 (hb), 978-1-107-69538-2 (pb).

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Keywords: Buddhism; insight; jhāna; liberation; meditation; mindfulness; phenomenology; The Four Noble Truths.

Whether consciously or not, the title of this new book by Eviatar Shulman cleverly subverts the bold claim of Richard Gombrich to know *What the Buddha Thought* with a more humble approach that does not efface the agency of the scholar in the study of early Indian Buddhism. Nevertheless, Shulman's approach can be considered quite revolutionary insofar as it stands on its head an unrecognized assumption of modern scholarship on Buddhism: namely, that there is an intrinsic tension, even incompatibility, between intellectualist and quiescent approaches to meditation. Scholars have long recognized that there are multiple explanations of the path to liberation described in the early Buddhist texts, and they have come up with a variety of theories to explain these different accounts, their possible chronological relationship to one another, and their relationship to 'non-Buddhist' sources. In *Rethinking the Buddha*, Shulman presents a convincing argument that much of this scholarship has been plagued by an unwarranted divorcing of intellectual analysis from meditation, when in fact the early Buddhist tradition saw intellectual analysis as *arising from* meditation.

Shulman begins in Chapter 1 with a general discussion of previous scholarship and his own methodological perspective. While recognizing the difficulties posed by the different accounts of liberation in the Buddhist texts, he criticizes previous scholars for emphasizing either philosophy or meditation at the expense of the other. He argues that descriptions of *jhāna* meditation that refer to the passing away of 'thought and analysis' should not necessarily be understood as being devoid of thought altogether. Therefore, when the texts refer to philosophical insights or 'knowledge' arising in such states, we should take them seriously, rather than treating them as contradictions to be explained away.

In Chapter 2, Shulman argues that early Buddhist philosophy was oriented specifically toward subjective human experience. He demonstrates this by pointing to the well-known story of Māluṅkya, whose metaphysical questions the Buddha refused to answer because they were not conducive to the ending of suffering. He then turns to the important Buddhist doctrines of not-self and dependent origination, showing that in each case the purpose of the Buddha's teaching was not an abstract truth, but rather a specific analysis of subjective experience designed to facilitate detachment and thus liberation.

Chapter 3, which I would argue is the most important chapter of the book, focuses on the concept of 'mindfulness' (*sati*) in early Buddhist thought. Whereas many treatments of mindfulness have taken it to be a sort of bare awareness, and thus intrinsically opposed to intellectualist approaches to liberation, Shulman convincingly demonstrates that the practice of mindfulness meditation as presented in the early Buddhist texts was thoroughly imbued with conscious thought. Not only this, but the practice of mindfulness was intended to superimpose Buddhist doctrinal categories onto subjective experience, so that eventually the practitioner would experience his or her own subjectivity through the lens of Buddhist Dhamma.

The fourth and final full chapter of Shulman's book finally tackles the central concept of Buddhist modernism and Shulman's argument: The Four Noble Truths. Shulman argues, again quite convincingly, that scholars have mistakenly read a later formulation of four 'noble truths' into texts that describe the liberation event in terms of what he calls 'four experiences'. The key term in this argument is the word 'this'. Shulman points out that in descriptions of liberation, no reference is made to abstract 'truths'. Rather, the texts simply say that 'this' is suffering, 'this' is the origin of suffering, and so forth. The word 'this', Shulman argues, referred to a specific moment of experience within the context of meditation. One could, for example, experience a pleasant or unpleasant feeling in meditation, and then recognize that 'this' feeling is suffering, that it has an origin and a cessation, and that there is a path leading to the cessation of that suffering. Only later, in particular in some (but only some) versions of the Buddha's First Sermon, were these four 'experiences' transformed into abstract philosophical truths.

Overall, Shulman's argument is quite convincing and solves, in part, a problem that scholars of early Buddhism have been banging their heads against for nearly a century: the seeming contradiction between mindfulness and insight in the early Buddhist texts. Put quite simply, the solution to the problem is that there is no problem: insight and mindfulness are compatible because mindfulness is in fact predicated on a discursive internalization of Buddhist principles. Descriptions of *jhāna* may refer to the passing away of certain technical types of 'thought and analysis' (*vitakka* and *vicāra*), but these must not refer to all types of thought or awareness, since the arising of insight and knowledge follows their passing away. Shulman takes the Buddhist texts at their word and shows that they make more sense than many scholars have allowed.

Having said this, though, I must offer one caveat. Shulman does not, nor can he be expected to, address all of the issues that pertain to differences in early Buddhist accounts of liberation. Schmidthausen has shown that there are actually three major models of liberation found in the early Buddhist texts, only two of which Shulman's theory can fully reconcile: (1) the attainment of the four *rūpa-jhāna*s culminating in an insight event that constitutes liberation and (2) liberation through insight alone, without (explicit) reference to the *jhāna*s. But there is another model of liberation, namely wherein the four *rūpa-jhāna*s are followed by the four *arūpa-jhāna*s, which in turn are followed by 'cessation', which is equated with liberation. Shulman does deal with this alternative model of liberation briefly (pp. 32–40), quite fairly placing it outside the scope of his study and noting that it does not obviate his main point, which is that the Buddhist texts repeatedly treat insight and *jhāna* meditation as being compatible. Still, the model of liberation through eight *jhāna*s followed by cessation cannot be ignored completely since it appears, at the very least, to be at odds with the other standard account of liberation occurring directly in the fourth *jhāna*. If Shulman is right, however, that the *rūpa-jhāna*s were originally understood as emerging out of the emphatically *discursive* practice of mindfulness, and were themselves discursive in some way even to the fourth *jhāna*, what implications does this have if one continues to the *arūpa-jhāna*s? Do they also involve thought in some way? Are they somehow an elaboration on the liberation event that other accounts place in the fourth *jhāna*, just as, Shulman argues, the four *jhāna*s were an elaboration on the practice of mindfulness? If, as Shulman suggests, the eightfold path is actually a linear path such that each step builds on the last, is it theoretically possible to expand accounts of liberation ever closer to the liberation event itself, *ad infinitum*? Ultimately, the best evidence of the value of Shulman's book is that it opens up even more interesting questions than it answers.