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Entering the Stream to Enlightenment

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BOOK REVIEW


A classic manner of conceptualising the stages of the Theravāda Buddhist path arranges the ascending steps as ‘stream enterer’, ‘once-returner’, ‘non-returner’, and ‘realised arahant’ (‘perfected person’). Entering the Stream to Enlightenment: Experiences of the Stages of the Buddhist Path in Contemporary Sri Lanka provides a detailed study of the first of these steps, that of stream enterer. Combining textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, Yuki Sirimane, a Sri Lankan attorney-at-law as well as a doctoral recipient in Buddhist Studies from the University of Kelaniya (Sri Lanka), seeks to define what it means to be a stream enterer and how one can recognize a stream enterer (6). In so doing she provides a valuable textual study of the nature of stream entry in the Pāli canon and Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga; any scholar who wishes to study Theravāda stream entry will want to consult this work.

Throughout the book one finds critical and erudite discussion of textual realities and, especially in the early chapters, this textual presentation appears strong. Surveying “the first four Pāli Nikāyas” (7), Sirimane argues that stream entry requires the breaking of the first three of a list of ten fetters that obstruct one from enlightenment. These first three fetters include “view on personality”, “clinging to rules and vows”, and “skeptical doubt” (5). From this, Sirimane describes a “fetter-breaking-experience” (32) in which one embodies deep Buddhist realisation and thus becomes a stream enterer. On the whole, this discussion provides significant instruction, although Sirimane’s limited fieldwork leads her to focus almost exclusively in terms of stream entry arising from one powerful experience, to the neglect of a possible process in which one arrives at the necessary insights more gradually than one “peak-point” (25) encounter allows.

Sirimane explicitly grounds her presentation in textual analysis and treats her fieldwork data as supportive information (8). Unfortunately, her fieldwork data do not really achieve even this modest goal. Fieldwork problems begin with the author’s quite limited sample of voices, since she tells us that she had a difficult time finding helpful informants (11–12). Some Buddhists shrank from participation because they felt that the focus on stream entry was somewhat spurious—a point to which I will return. Others hesitated because participation placed one in danger of publicly overrating one’s own spiritual experience, a position which particularly Buddhist monastics might wish to avoid. Other possible informants were perhaps dismayed by the oral interview protocol which involved 132 questions (215–220), a format which could have been re-arranged to be far less intimidating to informants. Therefore, for instance, the chapter on the existence of arahants was based on fieldwork with just one person, who participated because his spiritual teacher commanded him to do so. Further, Sirimane encountered serious language barriers to understanding this informant’s words (172). The informant’s words that appear in the text do so with only the most basic accounts of personal information, so the reader is left without the capacity for understanding the informant’s social, political or psychological contexts and motivations. Thus the data do not contribute much to our overall understanding of Buddhist experience.

As mentioned, some practitioners shied away from helping with the project because of its
focus on stream entry and, likewise, some scholars may not find the nature of stream entry to represent an overly compelling research problem on its own. However, if the fieldwork had been expanded and more fully grounded, the book’s materials could have been re-oriented towards a more significant contribution. Around the world, Buddhists and scholars of Buddhism alike wonder whether, and to what extent, advancement on the Buddhist path is possible in the contemporary world. Even the limited data of this book, which only briefly mentions this issue directly, suggest that progress to nibbāna may indeed be possible in today’s Sri Lanka, an outcome that could be broadly appreciated. Because of this, the book would have benefited from phrasing the central question not as ‘What is the nature of stream entry?’ but, rather as ‘How far do Buddhists in Sri Lanka successfully traverse the path?’, while enhancing the fieldwork in light of this alternative question.

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