ILKKA PYYSIÄINEN: *Beyond Language and Reason. Mysticism in Indian Buddhism.* Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1993. 188 pp. [Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae; Dissertationes Humanarum Litterarum 66.].

According to the author of this book, who cites André Bareau, Buddhism is essentially mysticism. He tries to show this in five chapters: 1 "Language and mysticism"; 2. "Sources"; 3. "Being-in-the-world and mysticism"; 4. "The Buddha and the absolute"; 5. "Conclusion". These chapters are preceded by an Abstract and a Preface, and followed by four appendixes and a Bibliography. Chapters 3 and 4, which address the question of the role of mysticism in Buddhism, constitute the core of the book. They attempt to illustrate this role for (i) Hīnayāna Buddhism (§ 3.1), (ii) Mahāyāna Buddhism (§ 3.5),[10] and (iii) the way the Buddha came to be conceived (chapter 4). This review will concentrate on these two chapter. Here it may still be noted that chapter 1 deals with a number of methodological questions, and indicates what Pyysiäinen understands by 'mysticism'. Chapter 2 presents the texts that have been used as sources. The appendixes, finally, reproduce some existing translations of portions of four Mahāyāna texts.

(i) It seems, at first sight, more than plausible to assume a link between Buddhism and mysticism. Various mental states (altered states of consciousness, if you like) are enumerated in the Buddhist scriptures and ascribed to the Buddha or to those who follow his teaching. Granting for the moment that these states can appropriately be characterized as 'mystical', a number of questions present themselves, such as: how many later Buddhists experienced these states? to what extent was Buddhist doctrine determined by such experiences? and so forth. The problem with regard to the period under consideration (from the beginning of Buddhism until the middle of the first millennium) is that personal accounts of mystical experiences are practically absent. Since everyone, including our author, agrees that not everything in Buddhism is mystical, the problem is where to draw the line. Which aspects of Buddhism can we reasonably consider to be expressions of mystical experiences, and which not? More fundamental methodological questions hide behind this and related questions: Should we assume mystical influence where we discern features which we also believe characterize mystical experiences? Or should we rather reject mystical influence in cases where a reasonable explanation can

10 § 3.1 is followed by § 3.5; there are no sections in between.

be given without having recourse to any such experience? Pyysiäinen evidently prefers the former of these two possibilities, and rarely bothers to look for alternative explanations.

Take, for example, the developments in Buddhism which are collectively known by the name of Abhidharma. Elements of existence (*dharma*) are here enumerated, studied, and classified. The results of these scholastic activities are, of course, visible in the various Abhidharma Piṭakas, but also to some extent in the Sūtra Piṭakas, and in a variety of commentaries and independent works. Few would consider the work of these Ābhidhārmikas the direct expression of mystical experience, even though some of the elements they study are connected with meditational, and therefore arguably mystical, states. The activities of the Ābhidhārmikas no more turned them into mystics, than writing (or reviewing) a book on Buddhist mysticism guarantees its modern author mystical experiences.

In spite of this, Pyysiäinen is of the opinion, which is one of his main conclusions in § 3.1, that the distinction between compounded (*saṃskṛta / saṅkhata*) and uncompounded (*asaṃskṛta / asaṅkhata*) *dharmas* (in Pyysiäinen's translation 'realities' or 'phenomena') is "basically a metaphor describing human experiences (read: mystical experiences, JB), not ontic matters" (p. 94-95). How does he arrive at his remarkable conclusion?

He cites in this connection (p. 91-92) *Udāna* pp. 80-81,[11] which he translates as follows:

> There is, o monks, a supranormal (*abhūtaṃ*), an unborn, a not made and an uncompounded (*asaṅkhata*), because, o monks, if there were not this supranormal, unborn, not made and uncompounded one would not know an exit (*nissaraṇa*) from what is born, produced (*bhūta*), made and compounded.

(The translation supranormal for *abhūta* is the result of confusion with *abbhuta*.[12] Since the corresponding word *bhūta* in the same passage is translated 'produced', *abhūta* means 'non-produced'.)

11 Pyysiäinen also refers to a passage from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (IV p. 362 ff.) which appears to identify the uncompounded with *nibbāna*.

12 A footnote (p. 91 n. 103) refers to the *Pali-English Dictionary* p. 60, no doubt (no specification is provided) to the following remark under the entry *abbhuta*: "that [the] significance [of *abbhuta*] as **a + bhu** ("unreal?") is felt in the background is also evident from the traditional etym. of the Pāli Commentators." See also p. 93, where he cites incorrectly from SN IV p. 371 "the supranormal one (*abhūtam*)"; the Pali has *abbhuta*.

Passages like this one are not of much help to prove that the distinction between *saṃskṛta* and *asaṃskṛta dharmas* is a metaphor describing mystical experiences, because they do not speak about such a distinction. It is of course imaginable, and even likely, that the Ābhidhārmikas were led by passages like these to introduce this distinction. But for this they needed no mystical experience.

Pyysiäinen is aware of the fact that different schools do not recognize the same *dharmas* as *asaṃskṛta*. The Theravādins accepted but one such element. According to Pyysiäinen (p. 94), "the *Theravādin* idea of the eternal Absolute behind the phenomenal world can be taken to be a metaphorical attempt to describe verbally the mystical experience of unification with the external world". Other schools had more uncompounded elements, the Sārvastivādins three, the Mahāsaṃghikas nine, etc. "To add new items to the class of uncompounded phenomena" - Pyysiäinen observes (p. 95) - "may serve as a means to narrow the gap between the world and the Absolute, and help one to correlate mystical experiences to every, day life". The presupposition underlying remarks like these, one would think, is that mystical experiences were well known (i.e., from experience) to the scholiasts who introduced these notions. This presupposition is not based on any evidence of which I am aware, and indeed, it seems completely superfluous for understanding the texts concerned.

Recall that Pyysiäinen characterizes the distinction between compounded and uncompounded elements of existence as "a metaphorical attempt to describe verbally the mystical experience of unification with the external world" (see above). What is metaphorical about the activities of the Ābhidhārmikas? Why does Pyysiäinen here introduce the notion of metaphor? He knows that the texts never claim to be metaphorical,[13] yet he feels free to impose this interpretation on the text on the basis of a categorization of religious apprehension which he considers appropriate (p. 94). It is not necessary to enter into details in order to see the great danger of Pyysiäinen's approach: first he proclaims without evidence that certain texts concern mystical experience; next, when it turns out that the texts do not express themselves the way he thinks they should, he imposes an

13 See p. 94: "... the metaphoric quality is not stressed and thus it is not, for instance, said that nirvāṇa is *as though* it is the ultimate shelter, or *as though* it is hard to see. This is because such parlance would weaken the full meaning of the descriptions of nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is for a Buddhist something real, not something as though real."

interpretation on them and claims that he knows better than their authors what they are about. The risks of such a procedure are evident.

(ii) Abhidharma is a rather extreme example, where few would be willing to follow Pyysiäinen in finding the expression of mystical experiences. But care is required even in those cases where one is more inclined to consider the possibility of practising mystics. With regard to Mahāyāna Buddhism Pyysiäinen states repeatedly that "[our sources] are trying to express ve[r]bally an ineffable experience" (p. 114). How should we understand this? Do we have to assume that all the authors of all the texts concemed had themselves had this ineffable experience? Or did they copy the words of others who had had it? Is it excluded that someone without mystical experiences could have written in this manner?

It seems to me that Pyysiäinen does not suffiently distinguish between an *ineffable experience* and the belief in an *ineffable reality*. People may very well believe in a higher, ineffable reality without having had any mystical experiences. Pyysiäinen admits this when he states (p. 43): "it is possible for a 'believer' to hold certain mystical beliefs without himself or herself having dramatic mystical experiences. It is even likely that mystical systems have been partly developed by people who have not themselves had mystical peak experiences." It is therefore conceivable that at least some of the passages used to "prove" the importance of mystical experiences in Buddhism were composed by authors who had never had any. Worse, these passages, composed by authors without mystical experiences, may conceivably have influenced the way in which 'real' mystics described their experiences. Pyysiäinen's first chapter supports, again, this possibility by saying (p. 42): "Mystics and 'theologians' of different religious traditions tend to interpret mystical experiences in accordance with their religious tradition, even though this would create some tension between the interpretation and the experience as actually felt." Given these possibilities, how can we be sure that we are dealing with mystical experiences, not just with mystical beliefs?

In § 3.5 (p. 116) Pyysiäinen sums up a number of features found in several Mahāyāna texts: "Thus, it seems that the most natural explanation of all these paradoxes, negations of negations and metaphors is that they are meant to convey a vision of the world essentially influenced by mystical experience." He does not tell us why this explanation is more 'natural' than the alternative one, according to which there were 'believers' without mystical experience who were convinced that there is a higher reality which can only approximately be described by means of

"paradoxes, negations of negations and metaphors". In fact, the explanation with the help of mystical experience has two defects, which greatly reduce its attractiveness: 1) mysticism is defined so as to fit the texts; 2) there is a straightforward non-mystical explanation for the ideas expressed in these texts.

1) Mysticism is defined in the first chapter. Pyysiäinen's "aim ... is to show that mystical experiences may count as an exception to the linguistic quality of man's being in the world". Two pages later he raises the question, no doubt with the intention to suggest an affirmative answer, "whether mysticism could be understood as an art of silence meant to restore man to a prelinguistic 'pure experience' not mediated by conceptual categories" (p. 38). Another useful concept, especially in connection with Buddhism, is emptiness, which is "another kind of representation of the silent experience" (ibid.). Paul Griffiths' three types of mystical experience, characterized by three different states of consciousness - (1) pure, (2) unmediated and/or (3) nondualistic - are mentioned with approval. The emphasis is throughout on the absence of conceptual categories and of notions determined by language. What is missing in all these descriptions and characterizations is any reference to the emotional side of mystical experiences. Terms such as 'ecstasy' and 'enstasy' are conspicuous by their absence. These terms, it is true, are mentioned in passing in the context of a schematization of mystical experience (adapted from Roland Fischer); but Pyysiäinen discards this schematization, and with it ecstasy and enstasy, because he needs "some criteria on the basis of which an experience can be definitely said to be mystical" (p. 46). One may yet wonder whether one can really speak of mystical experiences without these 'emotional' states. They are present in the meditational states of early Buddhism: joy (*prīti*) and bliss (*sukha*) figure prominently in the Four Dhyānas. In the the forms of Mahāyāna 'mysticism' studied by Pyysiäinen, it may be noted, it is convenient not to pay too much attention to ecstasy and/or enstasy, for the texts do not usually mention these 'emotional' states. Pyysiäinen's concept of mysticism allows him, or so he thinks, to characterize *nirvikalpakajñāna* 'unconstructed awareness' as "clearly an unmediated and non-dualistic mystical experience" (p. 119). According to his defition it is, but one wonders whether this mystical experience has much in common with the one referred to in the early Buddhist Sūtras.

2) At least since the Abhidharma scholiasts, Buddhism has been linked to a vision of the world in which ordinary reality does not really exist. Only the *dharmas* exist, and in Mahāyāna not even the *dharmas* exist

any longer. Ordinary perception is therefore false, a construction that is to at least some extent determined by language, and the desire to see things as they really are - i.e., as the Buddha has supposedly taught them - becomes part and parcel of Buddhism. This desire is not necessarily linked to mystical experiences. This is not to say that no one tried to obtain the required insight through mystical experience; no doubt there were such Buddhists. Others, however, may have tried to obtain such insight by other means. One thinks here, for example, of Nāgārjuna, the author of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, who, as it seems, tried to destroy our conception of ordinary reality by showing its inherent contradictions. It seems likely that a person like Nāgārjuna strove to obtain 'unconstructed awareness' in this way. One might yet hesitate to believe that such intellectual activity would produce anything one would like to characterize as "mystical experience".

(iii) The role and function of chapter 4 ("The Buddha and the absolute") in Pyysiäinen's book is not immediately clear. This chapter describes how the Buddha has been conceived by his followers as embodying the Dharma; it discusses the Dharma-body (*dharmakāya*) in Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, the Buddha's skill in means (*upāyakauśalya*), his body as symbol of the cosmos, and his otherworldliness. What fails to become clear is what all this has to do with mystical experience. Indeed, while summarizing this chapter in the following chapter 5 ("Conclusion"), Pyysiäinen admits (p. 152): "It is obvious that the Buddhological conceptions contain much mythological elaboration of the meaning of the Buddha and have nothing to do directly with mystical experiences." Then, however, he continues: "But when we move on to the deeper level of Buddhist ontology, we encounter the influence of the mystical way of experiencing, even in the way the Buddha's position has been understood."

Unfortunately Pyysiäinen does not argue his position, not even in the chapter concerned (4). Mystical experience is barely mentioned in this chapter, and where it is, one has the impression that different issues are being confused. An example is the following statement, which concludes the section on the Dharma-body (p. 137): "Thus, the figure of the Buddha has been transformed into a symbolic representation par excellence of the mystical experience he attained, as well as of its consequences." This statement speaks of the mystical experience of the Buddha. The transformation of the figure of the Buddha, on the other hand, took place in the heads of people who may never have had any mystical experience; not even Pyysiäinen disagrees with this, if I understand him correctly. This development within Buddhism, seen in this way, illustrates at best the

result of reflections by non-mystics on mystical experiences. Here, as well as elsewhere in chapter 4, the emphasis shifts from mystical experience of Buddhists to mystical experience of the Buddha. The concluding section of the book confirms this shift of emphasis (p. 156):

> no attempt is being made to press Buddhism as a whole into the procrustean bed of mysticism, but only to point out that the historical roots of Buddhism lie essentially in mystical experience.

This, of course, is nothing new. The most important "historical root" of Buddhism is the historical Buddha, and few would contest the link between him and mystical experience. No new book was required to establish this. But in spite of this conclusion, most of the book is not at all concerned with the mystical experiences of the historical Buddha, but with the influence of mystical experiences on developments that took place long after him.

As a whole, this book does not lead us beyond the truism that Buddhism has much to do with mysticism. It does not succeed in showing that the doctrines and beliefs it discusses are expressions of, or essentially determined by, mystical experience. It rather gives evidence of the a priori conviction on the part of its author that many aspects of Buddhism must be the result of such experience. The result is unconvincing, confused, and of little use in understanding Buddhism in its various manifestations.

Johannes Bronkhorst