

**Paul Fuller.** *The Notion of iditthi /iin Theravada Buddhism: The point of view.* London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005. xi + 257 pp. \$180.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-34293-3.



**Reviewed by** Maria Heim

**Published on** H-Buddhism (May, 2008)

This book is a revision of the author's Ph.D. thesis from the University of Bristol. Based on a careful review of the Nikāya sources, it advances a single line of argument: right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) is neither the adoption of correct propositions or doctrines (as opposed to holding incorrect views [*micchā-diṭṭhi*]), nor is it the abandoning of all propositions and doctrines; rather, it is a "different order of seeing," involving a transformation in which one is free of craving and attachment to all views. Moreover, Fuller shows that this treatment of *diṭṭhi* is not an isolated or anomalous teaching emphasized in only a handful of Theravāda texts (such as the *Aṅgahaka-vagga* of the *Suttanipāta*), but is rather the Pāli Canon's general approach to right-view. This suggests that the resistance to holding fast to views or positions of any sort is prevalent in the Theravāda's approach to knowledge (including that advanced by the Abhidhamma literature), and thus cannot be seen as a strong point of contrast between Theravāda and Mahāyāna epistemologies.

Chapter 1 catalogs the various kinds of wrong-views as classified in the Vibhanga.

...ga and the four primary Nikāyas, which most generally elaborate two main varieties: wrong views of the self and the denial of *kamma*. These are wrong not simply because they are mistaken views of the world, but because holding them entails a grasping attachment to them. Chapter 2 describes the content of right-view not as the opposite of wrong-view, but rather as an altogether different way of perceiving the world. In perceiving right-view one apprehends the law of *kamma* and the cessation of craving themselves, rather than holding them as doctrines or advancing them as propositions. Moreover, views are evaluated in terms of the action they engender. Fuller argues throughout the book that abandoning an epistemological stance that draws distinctions between fact and value and between thought and action is crucial to seeing right-view as both produced by and leading to wholesome actions (the *dasa kusala-kamma-patha*), and, soteriologically, to the wisdom attained at stream entry. Right-view is thus not just seeing the way the world is, but involves a new way of being and acting in it.

Chapter 3 gives an account of the way that wrong-view functions by showing how greed is said to be at the root of holding views about the world. Chapter 4 shows how right-view, as the wisdom (*paññā*) of stream attainment, functions by abandoning attachment to all views and doctrines, even correct Buddhist doctrines. Chapter 5, "The Transcendence of Views," aims to deepen his overall argument that, paradoxically, right-view is in fact not a view at all, and that all views are sources of craving and attachment. Finally, Chapter 6 takes up for further reflection some of the issues raised throughout the book, including the apparent problem of whether the ideal of abandoning all views is itself a view, making it self-referentially incoherent. Here Fuller again argues that right-view is such a radically altered way of seeing that it side-steps the problem of its being a view that refutes the positing of all views.

There is an unresolved tension in Fuller's analysis between his guiding assertion that the main aim of right-view is "to induce non-attachment from all cognitive acts" (p. 42), and the idea, repeated throughout the Pāli sources as Fuller shows, that right-view has particular content—namely the four truths, impermanence, the workings of *kamma*, and dependent origination. If its primary function is to help the mind abandon clinging to all forms of knowledge, why then must it have this particular content? How exactly does apprehending, say, the four truths, help one to abandon all views? And what is it about the content of wrong-views that leads us to cling to them? To put it most generally, what exactly is the nature of the relationship between *what* is known and *how* it is known? Fuller takes stabs at this question from time to time without really resolving it. His suggestion that Hume's separation of "is" from "ought" should not be read into Buddhist approaches to knowledge is meant to do some heavy lifting here to indicate that knowing the truth entails a certain way of acting and being in the world. This is a helpful gesture, but still does not offer a clear and comprehensive account of

the underlying epistemology that he takes the Theravāda sources to suggest.

In his preface Fuller suggests that the book may well be merely an expansion of the argument made in an earlier article by his supervisor at Bristol, Rupert Gethin.[1] This does in fact seem to be the case; yet while Gethin's piece is considerably more concise, in some ways it says more than Fuller's book. Gethin argues many of the same points as Fuller does: that wrong-views consist not just in wrong propositions, but in clinging to them rigidly; that *diṭṭhi* is, according to the Abhidhamma, rooted in greed; that right-view, in contrast, is not merely a matter of abandoning false views and replacing them with true doctrine, but a "freedom from all views";[2] and finally, that these ideas are implicit quite broadly in the Pāli sources. But, unlike Fuller, Gethin emphasizes the *Dhammasa*?

..ga'i's *treatment of right-view as a cetasika in ordinary, sense-sphere, kusala consciousness, which suggests that at a quite ordinary level of consciousness "some kind of direct awareness of the nature of suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation occurs."*[3] Fuller does not explore what it means to say that right-view is a cetasika, what it is doing in these kinds of conscious thoughts, and how it is related to other cetasikas. While Fuller is aware that the texts describe *lokiya* and *lokuttara* levels of *sammā-diṭṭhi*, he is interested primarily in right-view at the level of stream attainment and beyond, seeing it as something "realized after a long course of action and the cultivation of the mind" (69). But finding right-view present in ordinary workaday moral consciousness seems significant for what it suggests about Abhidhamma theories of mind. While Fuller, commendably, does not neglect Abhidhamma material, his omission of this passage and its implications represents a missed opportunity to explore right-view's role in the rich and complex psychology that the *Dhammasa*?

..ga?i *and* Atthas?lin?\_ develop, cutting short the book's potential to demonstrate the distinctive contributions the Abhidhamma makes to the subject and to our understandings of Therav?da psychology more broadly.

On the whole, this is a useful and thought-provoking book. Still, one wishes that Fuller had made more extensive use of the available scholarship on these questions; in particular, his claim that his thesis argues against the "usual view of these notions" (p. 7) needs further substantiation. He mentions his departures from earlier work by Padmanabh Jaini, Steven Collins, and Carol Anderson, but he does not discuss the many scholarly treatments of *samm?-di??hi* as "right understanding," a translation that does not imply the adoption or rejection of views and thus seems to avoid the issues at the core of Fuller's analysis. In particular one notices the absence of any consideration of Prayudh Payutto's treatment of *samm?-di??hi*, which offers a subtle discourse on its connections to confidence (*saddh?*), emotion, and critical awareness, and its larger role in the Eight-fold Path.[4]

#### Notes

[1]. Rupert Gethin, "Wrong view (*micch?-di??hi*) and right view (*samm?-di??hi*) in the Therav?da Abhidhamma." *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (2004): 15-28.

[2]. Ibid., p.20.

[3]. Ibid., p. 25.

[4]. Phra Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhadhamma: Natural Laws and Values for Life*. Trans. Grant Olson. Albany: SUNY Press, 1995.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

**Citation:** Maria Heim. Review of Fuller, Paul. *The Notion of iditthi /iin Theravada Buddhism: The point of view*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14533>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.