

Spreading the Buddha's Word



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Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

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As a Buddhist I believe that the Dhamma had one enormous advantage over most other philosophies or ideologies – that what it contains is true. But I am also aware that it has several serious drawbacks, obstacles and stumbling-blocks that hinder an understanding of it and of its dissemination. To my mind the most serious of these drawbacks is the Tipitaka, the sacred scriptures. The New Testament is small enough to fit comfortably into the average pocket. Likewise, an English translation of the Koran without the Arabic text can be easily published as an average sized paperback. By contrast, the Pali Texts Society's English translation of the Tipitaka takes nearly 50 volumes. Here is an example of where big is not necessarily better. In my years as a monk in Sri Lanka I have never known or even heard of any Buddhist lay person who has even 5 or 10 volumes of the Sinhala Tipitaka in his or her home, let alone the whole thing. And of course, if you do not have a book readily at hand you are unlikely to read it.

Then there is another problem—that of translation. As astonishing as it seems, the first living language the Tipitaka was translated into was not Burmese or Sinhala, Thai or Cambodian, but English. Between the 3rd and the 6th centuries Chinese monks, often helped by Indian monks, translated parts of the Tipitaka into Chinese. But the language has changed so much since then that these translations are now difficult for the modern person to read, and putting them into modern Chinese is considered 'disrespectful'. Buddhist countries had the Tipitaka for centuries; worshipping it, putting its pages between gem-encrusted covers, wrapping its volumes in silk brocade and storing them in beautifully crafted and decorated cabinets - but they never translated it into a commonly spoken tongue. The *Culavamsa* mentions that one Sri Lankan king had the Jataka translated into Sinhala but it is unlikely that this translation was widely available; it was probably kept in the palace library.

It is interesting to note that the unavailability of the Buddhist scriptures in ancient times seems to have nothing to do with the likelihood that the majority of people were illiterate. The evidence suggests that in Buddhism's first few centuries many lay people had access to, read and were familiar with the *sutras*. Here is some evidence of this. Monks are supposed to stay in one place during the *vassa*, the rainy season. But the Vinaya says that a monk may leave his residence if he hears that a lay person who knows a *sutra* by heart which he does not know; is dying; he can go and learn the *sutra* from that lay person. So some lay people must have been known enough that monks could sometimes learn from them. The impressive stone railing around the Sanchi stupa had inscriptions on it mentioning the people who donated the money to construct this railing. Some of the men and women mentioned in these inscriptions are described as 'learned in a Pitaka', 'who knows many *sutras*', and 'well-versed in a Nikaya'. The *Divyavadana*, a Sanskrit work from about the 1st or 2nd century CE, describes a group of travelling merchants rising early in the morning to read some of the *sutras*. The so-called Sigiriya Graffiti indicates that Sinhala people of many different classes and professions could not only read and write but write well, and even compose verse of a high standard. But, in the case of Sri Lanka there is no evidence that these people had access to the Tipitaka, which of course was kept in Pali.

With the approach of the Buddha Jayanti in the early 1950s calls were being made to make the Tipitaka available in ordinary languages. The ministries of religious affairs or of cultural affairs in the countries that celebrated the Jayanti undertook to do this, but as seems that the initial enthusiasm soon slowed to a crawl. As for the Sinhala Tipitaka, 60 years after the project started it is still not finished. But beyond this unexplainable delay are other problems. Each volume of the Sinhala Tipitaka is very large and even two or three copies would be quite expensive for the average person. Then there is the problem of accessibility. I cannot read Sinhala, but monks who can tell me that the language in the translation is high Sinhala; archaic and difficult to read. Several monks have even told me that they actually find it easier to read the Pali than the old-style Sinhala. But it gets worse! Even if you were prepared to persevere and struggle to understand the language, just trying to get a volume requires time and trouble.

The volumes of the Tipitaka available so far can only be had from two or three outlets in the whole country. The Bible is available in nearly every hotel room in Sri Lanka, but trying to find the Tipitaka remains a desideratum. The same situation prevails in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. The sad truth is that other than the Dhammapada and small booklets containing the Mangala Sutta, the Metta Sutta, the Sigalovada and a few others, the thousands of other discourses of the Buddha remain unknown to the average person. All that wisdom is available mainly to a small elite who can read Pali, i.e. the Sangha. Things are very different for western Buddhists. Over the last several decades the American Bhikkhu Bodhi has translated all the Majjhima Nikaya, the Anguttara Nikaya and the Samyutta Nikaya into accurate, lucid English and enhanced each with excellent explanatory notes. This has been a major undertaking – all done by one monk! And what's more, these volumes are available in many ordinary bookshops in the West and on Amazon. And these translations sell well; Western Buddhists have a hunger to read what the Buddha said rather than just hearing the Dhamma preached in sermons or explained in secondary literature. Other books from the Tipitaka have been translated by Maurice Walsh, I. B. Horner, K. R. Norman and others and are all easily available.

In 1939 A. P. de Zoya embarked on an ambitious project to translate the whole of the Tipitaka into plain, easily understandable Sinhala for the benefit of the ordinary person. The whole project took over 20 years and with the help of some Buddhist scholars he eventually produced 48 volumes. Realizing that few people could afford to purchase this full set he then decided to do a selection of the *suttas* in ten volumes but he only got as far as the first two books before his death in 1968. De Zoya shows what one person can do if they have the devotion and the determination. Curiously, his books do not seem to have attracted a wide readership, probably because of circulation problems. I rarely see any of his volumes in the bookshops.

There are several things that make any religion vibrant and healthy, and one of these is a laity well-read in the sacred literature. The Buddha was clear that he wanted all his disciples and followers to know the Dhamma well. In the Mahaparanibbana Sutta he said: "I shall not die until the monks, the nuns, the laymen and the laywomen have become deeply learned, wise and well trained, remembering the teachings, proficient in the greater and lesser doctrines, virtuous and learned; not until they are able to tell it to others, teach it, make it known, establish it, open it up, explain it and make it clear; not until they are able to refute false doctrines taught by the others and to spread the convincing and liberating truth abroad."

Sri Lanka is beautified with hundreds of stupas and new ones are constructed every decade or so. It is studded with numerous viharas; elaborate eye-pleasing *pujas* and religious ceremonies are celebrated every year; pious people donate money to print books on Dhamma for free distribution, usually including a few already well-known *sutras*. But almost no thought is given to making the great treasure-trove of the Buddha's words more available for the ordinary man and woman. Given this sad situation I would like to suggest several things that could be done to rectify it.

A selection of several hundred *sutras* should be translated into modern every-day Sinhala and published in a single volume. The *sutras* selected should give preference to those dealing with subjects likely to be of interest to the average person; i.e. lay people. There should be explanatory notes, a glossary and a detailed index. Called the *Cula Tipitaka*, *The Small Tipitaka*, it should be made available at cost price or if possible for free; generous donors could pay for reprinting it in memory of their departed loved ones. Just as importantly, it should be as easily available as possible. Every school library and public library should have a copy. Wouldn't this be wonderful, wouldn't it be a true Dhamma-*dana*? Further, if an effort were made to have this *Cula Tipitaka* translated into English and have a copy placed in every hotel room in the country tourists who came here could go back home with just more than photos and good memories. Some might be drawn to the Dhamma.

One would have to admit that the many of the *sutras* are not easy to read; some are long, often due to continual repetitions. So together with the *Cula Tipitaka* another book should be published made up of

extracts from the *sutras*, taking the best of the *sutras*. In this form the book could include far more material than possible in the *Cula Tipitaka*. Other than this, such a book should have the same character.

Several decades ago a Japanese industrialist and devote Buddhist set up an organization called Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai to publish a book called *The Teachings of Buddha* similar to the ones I am proposing. This project has been highly successful. The book is beautifully produced, with fine paper and binding, so far over 8 million copies have been printed, it has been translated into 45 languages and it is available in thousands of hotels all around the world. Further, the book is free. Unfortunately, despite these achievements this book has several drawbacks. In the English edition at least, the language is awkward and clumsy, the reference system is confusing, and including of both Theravada and Mahayana *sutras* it leaves the reader unsure and slightly confused as to exactly what Dhamma is. But while this project shows what could be done it also offers a warning that such a project as I am proposing should be done with careful and realistic forethought, considering all the options and keeping the goal always in mind – making the Dhamma available, appealing and understandable to the average person.