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Comments on the Buddha Word

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Comments on the Buddha Word

It is the purpose of this article to give a few ideas which may be useful to bear in mind when one is reading the suttas, or discourses, of the Buddha. As practising Buddhists who have placed our trust in the Buddha as the true guide and good friend, we should approach these sayings with a certain attitude of reverence. According to tradition the whole of the Pāli canon is the Buddha-word, and we should treat with caution the views of various Western scholars who assert, “this is genuine and that a later interpolation.” In addition, there is no reason why we should not believe that the Pāli language, in which these scriptures have been handed down, was actually the language used by the Buddha, if it helps to arouse faith, despite what these scholars would say to the contrary.

The only sure guide we have to the interpretation of these sayings, outside of our own personal experience, is to be found in the writings of the ancient commentators, such as Buddhaghosa, and other

bhikkhus past and present, well versed in the tradition. It is far better to obtain our knowledge of what Buddhism is about from the available translations of these old texts rather than from popular books about Buddhism, of which there are so many. Although this way may appear as slow and difficult it is much more rewarding, and we are less likely to acquire more and more concepts and opinions. Modern authors tend to gloss over, or even miss out completely, things they do not like or misunderstand, and these, although often minor points, could be vital for our own understanding and spiritual development. A quite common attitude of these writers is to uphold the Buddha's teaching as being rational, scientific, or as a mere "philosophy of life." All this is true, up to a point. but when they exclude or explain away the miraculous, devotional and definitely religious aspects, this is surely rather overstepping the mark. It has been said that the Buddhadhamma is perfectly reasonable and logical up to the moment of attaining the Path, the seeing of the Unconditioned, but after that all such ideas no longer apply:

"... when all conditions are removed, all grounds for the arising are removed." [1]

There still exists with many people, confusion over

“attā” and “anatta.” Does Buddhism teach there is a “self” or “soul” or is it a “soul-less religion?” Concerning this almost classical controversy, if we only obtained our knowledge of the teaching from the Buddha’s discourses themselves this apparently perplexing question ought never to arise at all!

The Form of a Discourse

Turning to the suttas themselves, we should first of all note the type of audience addressed and, if possible, their level of understanding or attainment. This may show whether or not the subject matter is helpful to our own immediate situation. But do not hastily reject anything—all has some relevance. Is the Buddha talking to a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī, a non-human being (deva, yakkha), a lay-follower, a brahmin, or a follower of another sect (Jain, naked ascetic)? Again, is he talking according to conventional truth—that is to say, about kamma, healthy and unhealthy actions and their results, merit and demerit, generosity, moral conduct, heaven worlds, etc. Or is he discoursing on ultimate things? On the aggregates, sense spheres, elements, the dependent origination, Nibbāna? To make the best use of what we are reading it is good to be perfectly honest with ourselves here, to be quite sure, as far as is possible, where we stand, and what

our limitations and capabilities are. Usually, before dealing with the subject proper, a discourse commences with a brief description of where it was uttered, and the circumstances under which it was uttered. If this is not mentioned at the beginning, the commentary supplies the necessary information. There is always a specific reason as to why the Buddha gives forth a discourse. He never wastes words, and nothing is said which would merely fall on deaf ears. A person may come with a question, or he may have a doubt which the Lord knows by understanding the mind of that person. Again, there may be a genuine need unknown to the audience, or the Lord may just teach Dhamma out of compassion, knowing there are certain beings present who will benefit.

“... then the Lord, having surveyed the minds of the whole assembly with his mind, thought: ‘Who is there here capable of understanding Dhamma?’ Then the Lord saw the leper Suppabuddha sitting in the crowd, and having seen him, he thought: ‘This one is capable of understanding Dhamma.’ For the leper Suppabuddha he spoke a graduated talk, that is to say, a talk on generosity, good conduct, the heaven world, the disadvantage of sense-desires, the degradation of the defilements and the advantage in renouncing them ...” [2] The preamble, “Thus have I heard” refers to

the venerable Ānanda, who recited the whole of the Buddha-word soon after the Lord's Parinibbāna (not "death," it should be noted):

"All this was only heard by me, it was spoken by the Lord, the Arahant, the fully Awakened One himself." In saying this, the venerable Ānanda effaces himself and points to the Teacher. He puts forward the Conqueror's words, and establishes Dhamma as the (sole) guide. He demonstrates for direct experience the Lord's Dhamma-body by revealing it as it was heard by him. He thereby comforts beings who are disappointed at not seeing the Lord (in person) and tells them: "This is not a doctrine with a teacher who is dead, this (the Dhamma) is your teacher." [3]

At the end of a discourse there is often a tail-piece showing how the teaching was received and what happened to the audience subsequently.

The subject-matter of the discourses appears at first glance to deal with a bewildering array of topics, but it is possible to divide it up, for convenience, into four main groups: [4]

That dealing with defilements.

That dealing with conduct, the various meritorious actions and their results.

That dealing with penetration, the understanding of

the four Noble Truths.

That dealing with a person who has attained to realisation.

Of course this is somewhat of an oversimplification, and these four groups, more often than not, are combined in a great variety of ways. Something to be noted when reading the Pāli Canon is that, in spite of its bulk, all the material is treated very briefly; in fact, it can be looked upon as merely, a summary serving as an outline for a teacher to enlarge upon. The suttas mostly deal with type-situations and it is often difficult to apply the advice contained therein to one's own special problems without a fair amount of insight and introspection. Further, a sutta cannot be studied in isolation. There is an intricate net work of cross-references throughout the whole canon and, ideally, when reading one discourse, one should know everything else that has been said on that particular subject.

The Analysis of the Subject-Matter

Concerning the subject-matter, the commentaries analyse it in two ways:

Word for word analysis according to the grammatical construction, and the meaning or

meanings of individual words. This is not very useful however, without a knowledge of the original language.

The analysis of the meaning, purport, of the passage in question.

It is quite in accord with the spirit of the Buddha's teaching that the discourses should be investigated in these two ways, for, "... two things reduce to the confusion and disappearance of the true Dhamma. What two? The wrong expression of the letter and wrong interpretation of the meaning ...

"... These two things conduce to the establishment ... of the true Dhamma. What two? The right expression of the letter and the right interpretation of the meaning ..." [5]

In connection with the meaning, careful attention should be paid to the similes and parables used by the Buddha in illustration. These are always completely to the point, and demonstrate subtleties of meaning which could be brought out in no other way. It is interesting to note that the Buddha was the first to use the idea of the parable to illustrate a meaning, long before Christianity made use of it.

A useful method when analysing a passage is that of the four Noble Truths: Suffering, Origination, cessation and the Path. In the discourses these will be

found, individually and in various combinations, often not evident at first glance. For example, the first verse of the Dhammapada:

“Mind foreruns all states: mind is chief, (they are) made by mind; if with an impure mind one speaks or acts, from that suffering follows, as the wheel the hoof of the draught-ox.”

“An impure mind,” this is the second Truth; “from that suffering follows,” this is the first Truth. So here in this verse there are two Truths: Suffering and the Origin of suffering. The second verse of the Dhammapada contains the third and the fourth Truths:

“If with a pure mind one speaks or acts (the Path), from that bliss follows (cessation) like a never-departing shadow (simile).”

One should bear in mind that the Truth of Suffering is defined as: birth, sickness, old-age (decay), death, sorrow, non-fulfilment of wishes, the five “grasped-at” aggregates, whenever these are mentioned in the first Truth. Thus:

“Whoever at the outset, young man, stays one night in a womb; having come to birth, he continues, and does not turn back.” [6] This is suffering as birth.

“Just as the clay vessels made by a potter all end up by being broken, in the same way life ends in death.” [7]

This is suffering as death.

“There are four Dhamma-teachings taught by the Lord who knows, who sees, the Arahant, the fully Awakened One ...

The world is unstable and goes to destruction ...

The world is no refuge, no protection ...

The world is not one’s own, one must depart leaving everything ...

The world is insatiable, enslaved by craving ...” [8]

This is suffering as the world.

Under origination come such states as ignorance, craving, clinging, greed, hate, delusion, and wrongly regarding things as permanent, pleasant, me and mine. The opposite of these is the (Eightfold) Path, referred to as: wisdom, mindfulness, detachment, patience, calm, the perceiving of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self, etc. cessation is Nibbāna with all its various synonyms, such as: the supreme happiness, peace, the unborn, the undecaying, the

deathless, the refuge, security from bondage, the far shore, etc. The four Truths can be incorporated with the method of dependent origination (paṭicca-samuppāda-naya) thus: “Whatever there is of craving and grasping, all that has its source in ignorance and ends in suffering.” The dependent origination shows how suffering is linked to origination, and cessation to the Path, and how, by the removal of the cause, the effect collapses.

“The world goes on because of kamma (acts of will, craving), beings are held by kamma as is a chariot wheel by the linchpin.” [9]

The world of suffering, the wheel of births and deaths (saṃsāra), comes to a halt, and is destroyed by taking out the linchpin, the removal of craving, which is the origin of suffering.

Other methods of analysis are:

“Advantage, disadvantage and escape,” and,

“Injunction (what is to be done), method (how to do it) and fruit (the result obtained).”

“If he in whom there is desire for sensual pleasures is successful, certainly he is thrilled, having obtained what a being desires.” This the advantage.

“But if for a being, who has sensual desire, those

pleasures disappear, he is hurt, as if struck by an arrow." This is the disadvantage.

"He who avoids sensual pleasures as with the foot (one would avoid) a snake's head, he mindfully overcomes craving in this world." This is the escape." [10]

"A fool, having fared wrongly in body, speech and thought, at the breaking up of the body after dying arises in the sorrowful ways, the bad bourn, the downfall, Niraya-hell." This is the disadvantage.

"A wise man, having fared rightly in body, speech and thought, at the breaking up of the body after dying arises in a good bourn, a heaven-world." [11] This is the advantage.

"Whoever, having formerly been negligent, afterwards is diligent, he illuminates this world like the moon appearing from behind a cloud." [12] This is the escape.

"Look on the world as empty, Mogharāja (the injunction), continuously mindful (the method); uprooting the view of self you may thus be one who overcomes death (the fruit)." [13]

Another example of the latter method is the Metta-sutta, too long to be quoted in full, but which should be familiar to most. The first half of the first verse is

the injunction, “This should be done by one skilled in good ...,” the last verse is the fruit, “Not being involved with views ... undoubtedly one shall not come again to conception in a womb,” and the rest of the discourse is concerned with the method.

Perhaps the most famous injunction of all is the last saying of the Buddha as recorded in the Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta:

“Come now, bhikkhus, I exhort you: Of a nature to pass away are conditioned things, strive by (means of) diligence to realise (this).”

[14]

Finally, with the next quotation, we shall attempt to bring together everything that has been said above, to show how it can be applied in analysing a passage.

“The Burden indeed, is the five aggregates, the burden-bearer the individual. Taking up the burden is suffering in the world, putting it down is happiness. Having put down this heavy burden and not taking up another burden; withdrawing craving with its root, he is one who is desireless, one who has realised final deliverance.” [15]

Firstly, this passage deals with Penetration of the

Truths and the person attained to realisation, by means of the Simile of a burden. The “aggregates,” regarded as a “heavy burden” are the Truth of Suffering. “Taking up,” or grasping, the aggregates is the Truth of Origination. “Putting down,” “not taking up another,” and “withdrawing craving with its root (ignorance)” is the Truth of the Path. “Happiness,” “desirelessness,” “final deliverance” are synonyms for the Truth of Cessation.

Farther, “taking up the burden” is the disadvantage, because it produces “suffering;” “putting it down” is the advantage. because it produces “happiness.” “Not taking up another ... he is ... one who has realised final deliverance” is the escape. There is an implied Injunction “to put down” and not take up another burden, by means of “withdrawing craving with its root,” resulting in the fruit of being “one who is desireless ... has realised final deliverance.”

It will be seen that, really, everything converges in the four Noble Truths, for the disadvantage is merely suffering with its cause; the advantage, injunction and means are different ways of regarding the Path; and the escape and fruit are the cessation of suffering. It may be helpful to the reader to try this approach, for the four Noble Truths should always be present at the back of one’s mind. It is generally understood that the Buddha’s teaching is summarised in these four Truths,

and it should be realised that they may be bound in their many aspects, like a continuous thread throughout the whole of the Pāli Canon. The Buddha has declared that, “Formerly (i.e. from the time of the first sermon) as well as now, I teach but suffering and the cessation of suffering.” [16]

And again, according to a commentary, “Whatever was described and taught by the Lord without restriction, in various phrases, sentences, words, methods of presentation and ways of speech, was for the setting forth, announcing, uncovering, analysing, making clear, the making known of the meaning of just this Noble Truth of Suffering and the other Truths ... From the night of the Lord’s complete awakening till the night of the Parinibbāna; whatever the Lord spoke ... all that was the keeping in motion of the Wheel of Dhamma. Nothing the Buddhas, the Lords, teach is external to the teaching of Dhamma, the revolving of the Dhamma-wheel. From this, everything that has been learnt concerning the noble dhammas (i.e., the four Truths) should be investigated.” [17]

“Dhamma-wheel,” in the above quotation, refers to the Buddha’s first sermon, called, “The Discourse on the Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma,” in which the teaching of the four Noble Truths was first announced to the world.

All this should be sufficient to show the importance of these four Noble Truths.

It must be pointed out that these ways of analysis, outlined above, are not the invention of the writer of this article, but are an ancient method used by the commentators. They are to be found in two very old books, the Peṭakopadesa and Nettī-pakaraṇa, [18] said to have been composed by Kaccāyana Thera, who lived at the time of the Buddha.

Using the Discourses

The problem we have is to bring these sayings of the Buddha to life, to lift them out of the dry pages of the books, and make them living experiences today: to penetrate deeply into the meaning, with all its implications, by turning it over and over in the mind, and then acting accordingly. This teaching, in contrast to other systems, is called “*ehi-passika*,” a doctrine inviting one to “come and see,” it definitely encourages investigation, but this is best done by practice; by testing its ideas in everyday life, rather than theorising about them. The discourses are to be used, but a word of warning is necessary here, they are not to be misused, they are not ends in themselves, but merely a raft “for crossing over, not for retaining.” In the end we have to go beyond the words to the

experience they point to. There are many short utterances which may be used for meditation; for instance, those contained in the Dhammapada. And there are numerous cryptic passages which are well worth investigating, such as:

“What is impermanent, you should get rid of desire for that” [19]

“Objects are not worth holding on to” [20]

“If I were not, it would not now be mine” [21]

See also the verses and their explanation in the Majjhima-nikāya, suttas 131–133. Examples could be quoted indefinitely.

If we could really understand these teachings through our own experience we would be able to live independent of others, not relying on what they say is or is not Buddhism, or what we should or should not do. Which after all, is the aim of the Buddha-dhamma!

“If a bhikkhu has learnt, ‘all objects are not worth holding on to,’ he knows every object fully; knowing every object fully he knows every object accurately; knowing every object accurately whatever feeling he feels, whether pleasant or painful or neither painful nor pleasant, he dwells contemplating the impermanence of those feelings, he dwells

contemplating dispassion, he dwells contemplating cessation, he dwells contemplating renunciation ... so dwelling, he does not grasp at anything in the world; not grasping he is unperturbed; being unperturbed he experiences Nibbāna himself and realises: 'finished is birth, lived is the divine life, done is what had to be done, there is no more of this or that state.'" [22]

Notes

1. Sutta-Nipāta, v. 1076. [\[Back\]](#)
2. Udāna, V 3. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Khuddakapāṭha Commentary. [\[Back\]](#)
4. Nettippakaraṇa, p. 128. [\[Back\]](#)
5. Aṅguttara, I p. 58. [\[Back\]](#)
6. Jātaka, vol. iv p. 494. [\[Back\]](#)
7. Dīgha, vol. ii p. 120. [\[Back\]](#)
8. Majjhima, 82. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Sutta-Nipāta, v. 654. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Sutta-Nipāta, vv. 766–768. [\[Back\]](#)
11. Majjhima, 129. [\[Back\]](#)
12. Dhammapada, v. 172. [\[Back\]](#)
13. Sutta-Nipāta, v. 1119. [\[Back\]](#)
14. Dīgha, vol. ii, p. 166. [\[Back\]](#)
15. Saṃyutta, iii, p. 26. [\[Back\]](#)
16. Majjhima, 22. [\[Back\]](#)
17. *Peṭakopadesa*, p. 5. [\[Back\]](#)
18. See *The Guide (Netti-pakaraṇa)*, translated by

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, Pali Text Society, London 1963. The translation of the *Petaḥopadesa* will likewise be issued by the same publishers. [\[Back\]](#)

9. Saṃyutta, iii p. 74. [\[Back\]](#)
10. Saṃyutta, iii p. 60. [\[Back\]](#)
11. Saṃyutta, iii p. 56. [\[Back\]](#)
12. Majjhima, 37 [\[Back\]](#)

Table of Contents

Title page	2
Comments on the Buddha Word	3
The Form of a Discourse	5
The Analysis of the Subject-Matter	8
Using the Discourses	17
Notes	20