

Touched by Dharma

[This is a fuller version of the briefer “Dharma Windows” posted on Facebook, 22 Feb 2017.]

One of the most amazing experiences I often have while working on a sutta translation is how quickly time passes when I am engaged in an interesting problem. Often enough, I would wish, I could just go on working without need of food, sleep or break – like the devas. The teachings and ideas just keep flowing and connecting, and I need to preserve them for the benefit of others, especially posterity.

Since Pali House, where my family and I live and work, has almost all the sutta study and translation tools I need, I don’t really have to go anywhere to look for reference works or research materials. My library includes almost the whole Pali Tipiṭaka in Pali and in translation, and also almost all the Pali dictionaries and related books either in hard copies or soft copies in my computer.

Through some donations, I was able to buy a really good and fast computer and a large screen, and was also donated an old lap-top on Windows 7 to run the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed, CD-ROM 3.1) software. So, this is a period when I can say, almost everything is working perfectly in the Sutta Discovery (SD) translation work – but then again there is impermanence.

Everything seems perfect right now – except for TIME. I usually work in “windows” of 2-4 hours. The best time is the cool morning peace from 4 am onwards. I would physically tire, mostly from hunger, by around 8 am. I would have breakfast and then read the papers. Work begins again around 10 am, until about 1 pm, when we have a family lunch.

After lunch, I need some siesta, and later perhaps do some physical work around the house or outside. If the day is not too warm, I will be working again at my desk around 2-6 pm. Then, there’s dinner, followed by the night “window”, around 9-12 midnight.

However, in recent weeks, working on SD 50 (Theme: Awakening and nirvana) has been (and continues to be) so interesting that often enough I am able to work up to around 2 am as I had been doing before.

This would, however, mean that I will have to start later the next morning. How long I work is not determined by a time-table: this will sooner or later stress us. To be honest, there are occasions when I felt that the next sutta assignment must be difficult or boring, and I don’t think I would be able to do much with it. That’s my defilement putting me down.

The suttas are remarkable documents. Every one of them, since I started 15 years ago, has been interesting. And often enough, I need to revise and expand some of the older works when I discover new materials or information, or learn new things. A monk friend once quipped that these are my “sutta study notes.” They are works which are constantly updated as long as life lasts. In this sense, this is a “living” translation.

Recently, a sutta student complained to me that I tend to pile up too much materials into a page (she was referring to the SD 10.16 printed as a free book, “The Path of

Awakening”). In rather strong words, she complained that it was difficult reading and she “dared not” pass the book to her friends.

Looking through the book casually, I realized she had a good point – at least for local Buddhist students. So, I worked to leave a line’s space after every main header, sub-header and related paragraph. The result was that the reformatted version took an extra 20 pages! This would mean a significant addition to the cost of printing it.

The problems remains that I have to “loosen up” 50 over volumes, totaling over 10,000 pages I have worked on during the last 15 years. As a compromise to the problems of spacing and printing costs, I decided not the space out the “final” paragraphs (those with 4 digits, such as “1.2.3.4,” but to simply **bold** them so that they stand out. This also means some more editing work for the whole SD collection.

The challenge is not to see how high or far the mountain is, but to simply take the first steps, day after day. As we journey, we learn so many new things, see new places, meet new people, and make friends who share a love for the same mountain.

There were occasions, on busy days (with sutta or meditation classes, or counselling therapy sessions) when I can perhaps spend only, say, 15-minute or half-hour “window” in between journeys and breaks. That helps, too. The idea is not to let the work lapse too long – then, we lose the momentum and sense of purpose.

What is most inspiring about sutta work is that it generates great joy. Joy sustains interest. Interest powers the mind, the eyes, the hands, the whole body, to be present at the work table with the suttas, and piles of books and texts (and my cat, Tikki, in their midst), from which to draw the essence of a few lines, a paragraph, maybe a page, of work. But this is what translation work is about: loving and understanding the Dharma through the suttas for personal development and awakening.

It is not as difficult and time-consuming as writing a Dharma dictionary (lexicographers are known to confess that they have “no life”!). But here’s a secret: I am actually, as I go along, working on such a dictionary – called DEB (Dictionary of Early Buddhism) – to record all the key ideas and references so that I can quickly locate them when needed. With it, my work is significantly sped up and more connected.

A decade of reflections

The Sutta Discovery translation work is my full-time commitment, but I have also been writing this series of reflections every week since January 2007. At first, I wrote short notices to advertise the SD classes. Then, Ratna encouraged me to write more often. After a few months, I started writing the reflections weekly.

So, we are now celebrating 10 years of reflections inspired by the Dharma. Again here, often enough I have no idea what to write for the coming week’s reflections. However, at times, I awake at dawn with a whole reflection in my mind. Or, after I have shut down the computer and lazily dragged myself away to bed, just as I was about to lay my head on my pillow, my mind lights up with a creative flash. I know that if I do not write it down, it will fly away like some shy deva that just gently kissed my cheek to spur me on – and then he is gone. (This reflection, no 490, arose from such an experience.)

Over time, I've learned that the Muses do not tarry too long. If we have been visited by the Muses, and we are distracted by the world, we risk losing that precious gift entrusted us for just a moment. We are then likely to forget much of the inspiration, sometimes the whole idea – the world has a way of making us forget some of our most beautiful moments if we do not write it down or at least note it immediately, or tell it to someone beloved or attentive with zest and light.

We cannot plan to write a reflection. Sometimes, there are difficult periods when meeting a toxic person or after a sad event, we can only move with sadness and ponderousness. This is when we are likely to get some impatient people (probably those who have no idea how the creative process works) emailing in to “unsubscribe” from the weekly mailing list. Or, perhaps, they find what I have written to have stung them in a raw spot.

The point is that we cannot plan a reflection like planning a thesis or the blueprint for a building. We need inspiration to write a good reflection. Meeting happy and wholesome people, and participating in meaningful events, are good sources of inspiration. Above all, we must be touched by the Dharma.

The greatest appreciation you can show this joyful Dharma work is to read the suttas for yourself. And to dedicate the merits towards aspiring to attain streamwinning in this life itself. Let us live for the Dharma; the Dharma will then live in us. Sadhu.

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