

A living commentary

When I first started on the Sutta Discovery (SD) translation project in 2002, I had a hazy idea that it will be the rest of my life, but I wasn't sure how big the work would be. Fourteen years have now passed, and I have completed more than 50 SD volumes (each about 180-200 A4 pages long), totaling some 10,000 pages of annotated sutta translations and related essays.

I'm happy to say that I've been able to keep to the schedule of completing at least one SD volume every three months. This is, in fact, the time we take approximately to finish studying an SD volume at one lesson a week. The first lessons – and the SD project itself – started in the National University of Singapore Buddhist Society in 2002, and went on for some 10 academic years. Then, the same SD classes were introduced into the Buddhist Fellowship in 2003. And now, we have regular monthly classes at the Poh Ming Tse (Dunearn Road) and the Singapore Buddhist Mission (Ruby Lane). The weekly sutta lessons at the Minding Centre, Singapore – along with those at the other places – have been recorded for global YouTube viewing.

The SD translation is still going on, and at this time, I am working on SD 49c, whose theme is “Life of the Buddha.” I have just completed working on the **Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14), which speaks of the 7 buddhas and gives quite a full narrative of Vipassī Buddha, the first of the 7 buddhas. Apparently, what we know as Gotama Buddha's life closely parallels the Vipassī story. But there are many other interesting points to discuss here.

In fact, this very long Sutta (probably the longest after **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta**), and the study of it is so detailed that it has to be expanded into 3 parts (SD 49a, 49b and 49c). This is the first time we have a 3-part volume, totaling over 140 pages. Previously, the most we had were 2-part volumes, that is, **SD 17** on the 5 aggregates and **SD 36** on Buddhism and mythology. **SD 40** is also a special 2-part volume on “Levels of learning” (SD 40a1, 40a2). It, however, has a third part, **How Buddhism Became Chinese** (SD 40b), which is actually a book in itself, the result of reflecting on the very short (**Ahita**) **Thera Sutta** (A 5.88), [SD 40a.16](#). So, in a way, SD 40 is also a 3-part volume.

What is it that keeps the SD translation project going, even after 14 years, right on schedule? The simple answer is that it is a great joy to be able to translate the suttas. Firstly, there is no better way to learn the suttas than to translate them, and then meditate on them. Secondly, they are the most authentic early Buddhist teachings in Pali that are still available today. Thirdly, there is a great spurt in the academic study of Buddhism, especially Buddhology, philology, psychology and other approaches.

This new and renewed interest is significantly due to (1) the discovery of ancient Buddhist manuscripts in Afghanistan and elsewhere, (2) a very sustained and systematic comparative study of the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas (the first 2 volumes of the huge Chinese Tripiṭaka), and (3) the growing interest of modern mind scientists in researching and using Buddhist methods of meditation.

Then, there are a growing number of good expository books on Buddhism, which are helpful to the SD translation work. There is so much materials here (including those online), that we can only usefully read them if we are working full-time on the project. And we are doing so at the Minding Centre and Pali House.

Another significant development is the availability of **the Pali canon** online, including pioneer translations of their books by the Pali Text Society (PTS) in the UK. The SD translation makes use of all the available Pali canons of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and the PTS. We also refer to the Chinese and Sanskrit versions whenever necessary. The Chinese Tripiṭaka, too, is available online.

We are also fortunate to have, in Pali House, almost all the books of the Pali canons and their English translations (especially by the PTS), the various dictionaries and encyclopaedias of Buddhism, and related resources. It is timely here to thank all those generous supporters and volunteers who have donated for the purchase of such books, obtained resources for us, and in some way supported the SD project (such as setting up the website, and so on). We are humbled and moved by your goodness.

Many scholars from various universities and institutions have magnanimously sent me their papers (which otherwise can be very expensive to purchase from the publishers online) or answered my queries. There are also a growing number of learned Buddhist journals freely available online, which keep us up to date with Buddhist studies and researches. The names and electronic links for such resources are, as a rule, listed in the SD translations.

I've also been very fortunate to be in touch with learned monks, such as Anandajoti Bhikkhu (currently in south Thailand), Ajahn Brahmali and Sujato Bhikkhu (both of Australia, Aggacitta Bhikkhu and Kumara Bhikkhu (Malaysia), and Bhante Analayo (Germany), who have all been very kind in helping me out whenever I communicated with them regarding sutta difficulties that I have.

My 20 years as a Theravada monk, of which the first 5 years were spent as “tutelage” (*nissaya*) in Wat Srakesa Rajavaramahavihara (well known for its Pali scholarship in Thai) and the Mahā Chulalongkorn Rajavidyalaya (monks' university), greatly help me with a monastic and traditional foundation for the work I'm now doing. The time that I spent as a Visiting Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, USA, further honed me in the academic discipline vital for such a project.

The SD project is also a **living translation** in many senses of the term. Firstly, the translations are periodically updated to reflect new materials or understanding that have arisen. Secondly, the SD suttas have been translated according to the oral tradition, giving in full all the repetitive but reflective passages for meditation. Thirdly, there are a growing number of volunteer proof-readers globally who also benefit from reading the annotated suttas in English. Fourthly, the SD materials are all freely available online at <http://dharmafarer.org>.

One of the most important roles of the SD translation is that of **living commentaries** on the state of Buddhism today. Often, we are faced with some spiritual difficulties or some controversies that affect the Buddhist community, or we simply want to know “what would the Buddha say,” or “what do the suttas say” about the situation.

This is where the essays give a cross-sectional overview of the matter in question, such as Money and Monastics ([SD 4.19](#)), Dhyana ([SD 8.4](#)), Miracles ([SD 27.5a](#)), *Anusaya* ([SD 31.3](#)), Sexuality ([SD 31.7](#)), Cult Buddhism ([SD 34.5](#)), Right livelihood ([SD 37.8](#)), Love ([SD 38.4](#)),

Emotional independence ([SD 40a.8](#)), Cosmic Buddhas and Paradises ([40b.3](#)), Silence and the Buddha ([SD 44.1](#)) and Bad friendship ([SD 64.17](#)).

A vital aim of the SD translations is to give a better understanding of **streamwinning**, and to move us to aspire for streamwinning in this life itself. This is still possible because we have suttas that teach us about the historical Buddha, his teachings handed down to us by reciters and meditators, and which are records about noble saints, whose lives are inspiring spiritual examples. Above all, these suttas exhort us to cultivate our body and speech as a basis for mental cultivation and mindfulness, so that we live purposeful Dharma-spirited lives heading for awakening in this life itself.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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