

Only suffering and its ending—Yes!

In the Winter 2013 issue of the US magazine, Tricycle¹, Bhikkhu Bodhi, whose learning I deeply respect, wrote a surprising article entitled “‘I teach only suffering and the end of suffering’ — ‘Nope, I didn’t (quite) say that’ —The Buddha.” My first impression is that this is a Fake Buddhism quote, but there’s the “Venerablebhikkhu Bodhi” [sic] stamp to it. So, I read it carefully.

Interestingly, this famous saying appears only in two slightly variant forms in the following suttas:

(1) **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,38) SD 3.13: “Before and now, too, I only declare suffering and the ending of suffering” (*Pubbe câham bhikkhave etarahi ca dukkhañ c’eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodham.*)²

(2) **Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86,21.2), SD 21.13: the closing line: “I only declare suffering and the ending of suffering” (*dukkhañ c’eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhan’ti.*)³

AND ... AND

Bh Bodhi took some trouble to analyse the Pali, especially how “ca” is used. However, I think he has made a mountain of plain flat ground. First, he mentions how “c’eva” = “ca + eva.” Yes, it is true that “*dukkhañ ca ... dukkhassa ca nirodham*” may literally read “suffering AND end of suffering AND.” “Ca” means “and” and often appears as a correlative, a pair – this is Pali, which in English simply reads “and.”

LITERALNESS is just a word-analysis to help an idiomatic translation – hence, there is no issue here at all. Of course, we can talk “literal” and it all sounds impressive to those who know little or no Pali.

Actually, the whole article – despite its interesting analysis of some Pali words and sentences – is only about this one sentence:

“In some context *eva* has an exclusionary sense, meaning ‘only, solely’.”

But here lies the rub: Bh Bodhi says that (in both suttas) “*eva*” has only an emphatic sense – which can and should (he says) be translated as “indeed” or left untranslated.

¹ <https://tricycle.org/magazine/i-teach-only-suffering-and-end-suffering/>.

² **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,38), [SD 3.13](#).

³ **Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86,21.2), [SD 21.13](#).

ONLY A STORM IN THE MIND

So, according to Bh Bodhi, we should translate the line simply as “... I teach suffering and the cessation of suffering.” Notice how “weak” this statement becomes without the “only,” and which applies to both Sutta contexts. This is where I disagree with Bh Bodhi: there’s nothing wrong in translating “*eva*” as “only” here. In fact, it has a special EMPHASIS to the Buddha’s declaration.

The main issue here is that Bh Bodhi views that we should not take “*EVA*” as “exclusionary” (meaning “only this and nothing else”). But this is not the problem here—in fact, there is NO problem at all! The particle “*eva*” is EMPHATIC here, and “only” is emphatic in the translation. The English “only” is not exclusively used in an “exclusionary” way.

In fact, we often use “only” in an emphatic sense: “If ONLY you had come, you would have enjoyed the talk.” “If ONLY I had the money, I would have donated a retreat centre to the monk.” “I ONLY told him not to meditate too long.” (I have also told him a lot of other things! Note the emphases.)

MEANING AND PURPOSE OF LIFE

However, arguably, if we had translated it as “I declare ONLY suffering and the ending of suffering,” we may give the closing phrase an exclusionary effect. But, again, this is NOT a problem. What the Buddha is saying is that all his teachings relate to the 1st noble truth (suffering) as the MEANING of life. This automatically includes the 2nd noble truth (arising of suffering), too—which are expanded into DEPENDENT ARISING. This is about SUFFERING (1st and 2nd noble truths).

Then, we have the 3rd noble truth (ending), which together with the 4th noble truth (the path) refer to the ENDING of suffering. This is about the PURPOSE of life (to end suffering), which is elaborated in DEPENDENT ENDING (the counter-cycle of dependent arising). This is about the ENDING OF SUFFERING.

Hence, when the Buddha declares, “I ONLY declare suffering and the ending of suffering,” he is saying that this is the essence, the foundation, of his teaching. To me, this is one of the most beautiful sentences in the sutta collection. It gives the essence of life and how early Buddhism is so relevant to life. (But if we say: “I declare suffering and ending of suffering,” it has neither the truth nor the beauty of the Buddha’s Word: it also lacks the Dharma OOMPH!)

IT HELPS US THINK

Hence, there is NO problem at all with these translations, which in fact best brings out what the Buddha wants to emphasize:

(1) **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,38) SD 3.13: “Before and now, too, I only declare suffering and the ending of suffering”.⁴

(2) **Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86,21.2), SD 21.13: “I only declare suffering and the ending of suffering”.⁵

None of these would in any way affect Bh Bodhi’s celebrity status as the best Pali scholar there is. It only shows he thinks about Pali and it makes us think. As the Buddha says, in the (Ahita) Thera Sutta (A 5.88), SD 40a.16: even famous teachers can be wrong. In the case of Bh Bodhi, however, more often he is right.

Bh Bodhi’s style in this article is surprisingly rather tabloid. It is for a magazine, which has to sell. If we really want to know the suttas, it is better to read the suttas themselves: that’s where the Buddha has the final word. It will change our lives for the better.

R516 Revisioning Buddhism RB190

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2017

⁴ **Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22,38) [SD 3.13](#).

⁵ **Anurādha Sutta** (S 22.86,21.2), [SD 21.13](#).