

Revisioning Buddhism 10

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

Why Suttas Repeat Themselves

Despite the title, it is always true that suttas repeat themselves. Take this remarkable passage, for example, it occurs only twice throughout the Pali Canon, that is, in the Vatthupama Sutta (M 7) and the Salha Sutta (A 3.66):

He understands thus:

‘There is this.

There is the lowly.

There is the excellent.

There is the escape beyond the occurrence of this perception.’

[The Buddha then says that all this has realized by the arhat.]

(M 7.17/1:38), SD 28.12 = (A 3.66.13/1:196), SD 43.6

From the Sutta context, it is clear that the above passage (especially the four mysterious lines) refer to the four noble truths. The meaning of the four lines are as follows:

- (1) “There is this” refers to the first noble truth: “This truth that is suffering should be known.”
- (2) “There is the lowly” refers to the second noble truth that is craving; it is lowly and to be abandoned.
- (3) “There is the excellent” refers to the third noble truth that is the ending of suffering, namely, nirvana, which is to be cultivated.
- (4) “There is the escape beyond the occurrence of this perception” refers to the fourth noble truth, that is the noble eightfold path, which is to be cultivated.

Such language may appear cryptic to us, but it is a spiritual shorthand with which awakened minds communicate. The Buddha communicates in a similar way, for example, to Bahiya Daruciriya (the bark-clothed ascetic)¹ and the weaver's daughter of Alavi.²

More commonly, however, we find that the Suttas tend to repeat important points and passages. On closer examination, we will often find a pattern in the Sutta narrative, that is, how the sutta composers present the teachings effectively in the oral tradition.

Scholars of ancient scriptures have called such repetitiveness in the religious texts, “ring composition.” Here is how the ring works. First, there is a prologue that presents the theme and context (a sort of syllabus). The story then builds up towards its crucial center, that is, a turning point or climax. Once there, or at the end of every new passage, the beginning or opening idea is repeated as verbal markers (the refrain) and the narrative reverses direction, as it were.

The second half of the story rigorously echoes the first, but in a short of reverse order, going back to the beginning idea, the key teaching. The ring structure is like unrolling a ball of thread that is then wound back into its spool.

¹ **Māluṅkyāputta Sutta** (S 35.95/4:73), SD 5.9 = **Bāhiya Sutta** (U 1.10/6-8), SD 33.7.

² See DhA 3:172 f or Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004 §3. Cf Dh 294 f.

A simple example of ring composition is found in the Vitakka Santhāna (M 20), where the Buddha teaches five methods of overcoming mental distractions during meditation. From the second method onwards, the passage would begin by saying something like “Now, if the previous method (it is listed) should fail, then do this...”³

Another example, a bit more complex, is that of the Maha Vacchagotta Sutta (M 73), where the brahmin Vacchagotta asks the Buddha about the various categories practitioners who are saints, that is,

- (1) arhat monks,
- (2) arhat nuns,
- (3) laymen non-returners (who are celibate),
- (4) laymen streamwinners (who enjoy sensual pleasures),
- (5) laywomen non-returners (who are celibate), and
- (6) laywomen streamwinners (who enjoy sensual pleasures).⁴

Both in Vacchagotta’s questions and the Buddha’s answers, the practitioner category is mentioned in a concatenated manner (as in a computer programme). The Buddha thus answers, “Yes, we have numerous (1)

- Not only (1), but numerous (2), too;
Not only (1+2), but also numerous (3), too;
Not only (1+2+3), but also numerous (4), too;
Not only (1+2+3+4), but also numerous (5), too;
Not only (1+2+3+4+5), but also numerous (6), too;

Such ring compositions make use of other programming sequences, such as concatenations, recursive cycles, nested passages, and so on. This is a hallmark of the early Buddhist oral tradition, when nothing was written down. In the Sutta Discovery translation series we generally do not shorten such passages,⁵ but preserve them where their repetitions and cycles are vital not only for remembering the Teaching, but also for reflecting on the nature of true reality. The Teaching, in other words, must be rightly heard before we can really understand it in a positive life-changing way.

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³ (M 20/1:118-122) = SD 1.6

⁴ (M 73.7-13/1:490-492) = SD 27.4.

⁵ In the manuscripts, these are called *peyyāla* (roughly meaning *et cetera*).