

The early Buddhist texts

For decades, as a seeking Buddhist, I kept an “open” mind to all the Buddhist traditions. Surely all these rich and crowded Buddhisms must surely be right in some way. Often enough during my public talks I was asked questions about Guanyin, Amitabha, guru worship, Japanese Buddha, etc, and I tried to answer them from a scriptural viewpoint – from the scriptures of the various Buddhist traditions.

As the years passed, I realized I am simply defending teachings never taught by the Buddha, but are later innovations which do not really help us understand what the Buddha actually taught. When I first posted this reflection on my Facebook page, I was criticized for writing this very sentence by a western Korean married “monk,” thus: “You are disparaging the Dharma, the Mahayana, and driving a wedge in the Sangha which the Buddha said, in the Pali canon is a heinous crime and one of the few things where there is no forgiveness forever.”

We can imagine how much ethnic Buddhism has diverged from the Buddha Dharma. It took some time before I realize many such ideas have been used to promote sectarian domination and as means for worldly authentication. The bottom line is, sadly, Buddhism is used as a means for social control and wealth management. Or, we must conclude that we are disastrously ignorant of our own faith.

Some claim that even the earliest Buddhist writings were “written down” hundreds of years after the Buddha in a language he didn’t speak. How can such writings be reliable? Are we to reject the early Buddhist texts (EBTs) simply because they were “written down” hundreds of years after the Buddha in a language he didn't speak”?

Do we reject the Rosetta Stone because it was written some 2000 years ago? If we reject the texts in Pali (which the Buddha “did not speak”) should we not reject all the Buddhist texts in Sanskrit or Korean, too (which the Buddha did not speak)? We know the Buddha discouraged the use of Sanskrit in his teachings.

The EBTs give us the eyes with which to see and the heart to feel the Buddha’s teachings. Our meditation and inner stillness teach us how to see and understand these texts and use them for our personal and spiritual growth and the benefit of others. The EBTs are lenses with which we examine ourselves and the world, and our meditation works with the EBTs to makes proper sense of what we see of ourselves and the world.

The great Belgian scholar Étienne Lamotte (in *History of Indian Buddhism*, 1988:156) says: “ ... with the exceptions of the Mahāyānist interpolations in the Ekottara, which are easily discernible, the variations in question [across the lines of transmission] affect hardly anything except the method of expression or the arrangement of the subjects. The doctrinal basis common to the Āgamas and Nikāyas is remarkably uniform.” This is in stark contrast to non-EBT texts.

Occasionally, we even hear Buddhist preachers who claim that the Mahayana texts are older than the early Buddhist texts, and that ahats still need to work for awakening, to become Buddhas, and that the historical Buddha himself is not fully enlightened, or that it is better to be a Bodhisattva (who, in their mind, is also awakened). None of these teachings are found in the early Buddhist texts (EBTs).

I realized that I have to stop defending or propping up other preachers' fancies and help to destroy the historical Buddha's teachings. We need to go back to the suttas, the early Buddhist text before they are lost, and then we have only the private truths and less-than-perfect gurus, so that Buddhism will end up like some other world religion messing up the world today. It's still not too late to return to the noble path, or at least head for it.

Recently, in his detailed and thorough Comparative Study of the Majjhima Nikāya, Anālayo (a German scholar monk) shows that all significant aspects of early Buddhist doctrine are the same across all extant textual transmissions of the Suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya.

Among the parallels to the Suttas of the Pali Majjhima Nikāya, the most important textual source, due to its completeness, is the Sarvāstivādin Madhyama Āgama preserved in Chinese. Such texts often help us better understand the Pali suttas or EBTs.

Recommended reading:

<http://ocbs.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/authenticity.pdf>.

R542 Revisioning Buddhism 203

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2018