

Slow learner isn't no learner

Vesak 2021 message from Piya Tan
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A Dhamma friend from Canada loves reading suttas in translations that he never fails to ask for my latest works, especially revised or updated versions of my old translations. Then, he would print them out, read them carefully, adding prodigious notes of his own, and practically following the cross-references, even checking out the links to various works I have quoted in the translations.

Recently, I had been revising and updating more old titles than usual, that is, besides completing the regular titles earmarked to be published quarterly. In one of his recent replies, there was an excited tone to it. After receiving a revised SD file, he remarked that he was trying to keep up reading what I had written:

"There's an interesting joke I once saw on TV: maybe from M*A*S*H ... someone is reading a letter and panting. One of the doctors asks 'What's the matter?' The guy replies: 'It's a letter from my mother; she writes faster than I can read!'"

Slow learner

I replied to him and said, Marten, to be honest, I see myself as a slow learner. I'm so slow that I was basically home-schooled in Philosophy, Sociology and Psychology. When I was a monk in Thailand, the monastic schooling was, well, monastic, and I easily kept up with the daily lessons in Vinaya, Dhamma and Pali. I spent the full first year learning Thai, which was easy since everyone else spoke the language. Even when we uttered a word of Thai, we are told "Phud Thai kheng!" (You are good in speaking Thai!)

As I wrote to Marten, I was reflecting on the way I worked with the suttas, reflections, and the 4 Zoom lectures a month. The Zoom classes were easy: I had actually prepared for them over 3 decades ago, and Ratna's PowerPoint slides gave them an updated feel, making the lectures more visual and engaging.

What comes next

As for the sutta translations, I started, logically, with the 1st sutta that the Buddha was traditionally said to have taught. Then, the 2nd one, and the 3rd. The rest followed thematically and were, as a rule, about related suttas or teachings. They were linked together like a network of suttas, connected with related events, stories, teachings and commentaries.

In other words, I did not really plan what suttas to translate: the titles, as it were, came to me on their own accord. It's like reading from a forest library of ancient documents. Each document teaches something familiar, with a new feel; saying something familiar, linking to some other documents; or there's some new terms, ideas or stories that I need to find out, which yield more connections with some other suttas and texts.

So, it's like back to home-learning again, and it was really fun since I have practically all the Buddhist scriptures in our Sutta Library in Pali House. Often I have a lot of materials and have to summarize or condense them. Often enough, a single sutta or title may grow into a whole SD volume of nearly 200 pages.

Seeing and doing

Then, musingly, I wrote to Marten and quipped that even Siddhattha could only act in the moment as it arose to him. He saw the 4 sights, and did what he felt was the right thing to do. Why is there decay (the old man), disease (the sick man) and death (the dead man)? Why is the recluse radiant, free and happy? He wanted to be like that happy recluse.

The next logical thing for him to do was to seek the best meditation teachers and learn from them. He learned all they had to teach; but like our modern Dharma speakers, they were not enlightened. Siddhattha was on his own again, and this time he turned to the popular idea then that we should purify the body by torturing it! For 6 years he did just that until he nearly killed himself! He knew he had to change course. He found the middle way!

At home with the Buddha

The self-mortification story echoes somewhat of how many of our local Buddhists believe that they will get richer by making monks and nuns rich (but both are creating bad karma in doing so), and that merits (good karma) can be transferred! After a century (that's 100 years), we still know almost nothing about suttas. Many of us have strange sounding Sinhalese names, as if our local names are not good enough as Buddhists. But we do not know sutta names.

My point is that we have been following the Buddhism of Foreigners, but we have not been keeping up with the Buddha's teaching. Perhaps, for most of us, the Buddha is teaching us faster than we can keep up. Or, that the sutta translations are appearing faster than we can read them.

Now, it's going to be 2 decades (that's 20 years) now. After 20 years of almost daily sutta work, there is enough for us to read: some 80 SD volumes of over 10,000 pages. Anyway, at least, I can say that career-minded young monks (many from Myanmar), studying in the institutions and universities of Sri Lanka, have found the Sutta Discoveries helpful in their career!

Sutta practice

On a happier note, we have a growing number of people who do make a careful study of the suttas, now that we have detailed modern commentaries in the Sutta Discovery series. Working on the suttas, studying them, and following up with mindfulness and meditation practice, is the best in Dhamma we can do today.

It's like being with the Buddha himself: after all, these are the teaching closest to the Buddha himself, a record of his own experience of awakening, and those of the arhats.

Reading these suttas is Dhamma practice in our own time. There's no rush, like breathing, a breath at a time. The important thing is not to stop breathing.

Wake-up poem

Now that age is catching up with me, I do not spend long hours like before, hunched before the translation work. I usually spend brief periods of 15 minutes, half an hour, maybe an hour, at a time but many times in a day. It's the "drop-by-drop" method of Dhammapada verse 122.

Even in the 20th year of full-time sutta work, I never think, I will complete translating this or that sutta, or I will complete so many sutta by such and such a time. I simply list what needs to be done. When I look at the list, I reflect on how one short human life is never long enough to complete such work.

The point of sutta work is not completing so many Nikayas or suttas. It is to understanding RIGHT NOW what the sutta is telling, the truth and joy of the moment. Then, I notice how what I know connect together. How I renounce old views, old self. This is the JOY of the Buddha word.

Light beings

I had written a "wake-up" joy poem (it came to me when I woke up one morning) called "Be that we are" as my Vesak greetings for you. Now a dear Dhamma friend who loves suttas, has inspired me to write this message for you.

The joy of the suttas raises us from our subhuman states. As a human in mind, it is easier to meditate and attain divinity, angels without wings, radiant beings in this blind darkness. Vesak reminds us to work to reach the path of awakening in this life itself.

Vesak blessings.

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