

Losing all that we have

What we can learn from it

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After nearly 5 years, as my computer reaches the last few months of its warranty, it broke down and is now at the service centre. For a while, we thought that we have lost all our SD (Sutta Discovery) work since 2002 (nearly 20 years of sutta translations, 700 reflections, and other writings).

Ratna and I frantically searched some half a dozen times in the external hard-disk we had removed from the system to continue our work on an interim old computer. To our shock, we could not find any of the sutta files there!

Life's work

Reflecting logically, I concluded that those vital missing files—all our life's work—must be in the 4-terabyte drive that came with the computer we bought nearly 5 years ago. The frightful thought that the service centre would reformat that drive, since it is the System Drive, reminded us of a similar experience about a decade back when we lost all our sutta files during a computer crash.

We had some back-ups then, but the newer files were not there. We realized some of the latest files had been shared with some sutta-loving friends. So, we contacted them and retrieved those precious files. Bit by bit we reclaimed the lost files, and reconstructed them.

Silver lining

However, the latest file that I was working on was irretrievably lost since it was the one I was working on when the computer crashed. I had to rewrite all of it: I recall feeling a sense of relief that I still had a good idea of what I had written. In fact, one benefit of such a re-writing is that we can have a better version of it! That was clearly a silver lining in the dark cloud.

Our Dhamma son, William, comforted us that things would be all right, and drove us to the service centre in the City (it has been many years since I last went there!). Thankfully, those data were still there in the computer!

Losing all that we have

I was mistaken in thinking that the 4-terabyte drive was the System Drive with a partition as a data drive. The System Drive was an SSD (solid state drive), and a second drive was the 4-TB Data Drive. So we copied all those precious files into an External Hard Disk, which I expeditiously learned about just after the crash. It took some 3 hours to download them. It was well worth every second so that our work, the teachings, are not lost. Another reflection on impermanence.

During this challenging time, I recalled Erich Fromm's wise words in his "To Have or To Be" (1976), where he wrote: "If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I? Nobody but a defeated, deflated, pathetic testimony to a wrong way of living." He was writing about those who identify themselves with the material things they have.

Meaning

All that I have is my sutta work (they are precious to me; they are what I share with you). When my computer broke down, my first thought is that I would lose everything that I have. But I have only lost the material appearances of what I know and teach. Ironically, the moment I put my understanding and ideas into writing, they are frozen in time, as it were. But I have moved on.

Learning of my apparent loss, a number of people wrote to me with words of comfort. My response was that so long as there are those who love Dhamma, who seek to understand the suttas, all this loss and suffering are **meaningful**: everything, even the Dhamma as teaching, is impermanent.

Revision

Over the last 2 decades, I have learned many new things about the Dhamma, and, with that, many new things about life itself. In an important way, I have only lost the past, which is already gone anyway. Hence, if necessary, and logically, too, I must rewrite all the 80 volumes of the sutta translation, which had taken 20 years. This means I will have a **revised** (better) edition, in another 20 years. It also means that I must sacrifice doing new translations or writing, or much less of them.

There is a pious legend, clearly to legitimize Buddhaghosa's Visuddhi, magga, that he lost his masterpiece after completing it, stolen thrice by the devas who were wondering if he had remembered what he had written. Even after losing his masterpiece thrice, Buddhaghosa rewrote exactly the same thing each time, says the legend. Actually, it would have been more surprising, in a Dhamma sense, if he had written a better edition each new time!

Purpose

What we learn about the Buddha and the arhats in the suttas or from the teachers are all gone, too. They are all awakened and passed into nirvana. This is the lesson we must learn when what we now see as most precious is lost or seems lost. It helps us move in the right way to reach the path of awakening here and now.

The **purpose** of such suffering is to learn from our loss. It is like our clearing our path of growths and stumps, rocks and stones, straightening and levelling a path that is safe and easy for Dhamma travellers to nirvana.

The all

Those who pretend or boast of saving “the world” or “all beings” do not even understand what they are saying, except making some clever statements perhaps for their own purposes or lack of them. The “all” means all beings past, present and future, that is, samsara itself. The past is gone; even the present is passing as we read this; the future will never come. How do we save all of them? It’s all vain talk, betraying a basic misunderstanding of impermanence itself.

The Dhamma is not about saving all: it is about **each of us** being able to save oneself; that we must make that inward journey. Only we can do that for ourselves, and should do so.

Awakening

Neither religion nor science can save the world or all beings, though as many as possible should benefit for their goodness (which is undeniable and worthwhile). The Buddha, with his awakening, understands the “**all**” (*sabba*). It (singular!) refers to all our 6 sense-bases (the 5 senses and the mind) and how, with these, we make sense of the world. This is the virtual world we create every waking moment and live in.

Our true task, then, is to know this “all” that we really are: our 6 sense-bases, how they work, and how we can rise above them to become “pure mind,” which is awakening like that of the Buddha.

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