

Selected Texts

A word of explanation may help the modern reader to understand and appreciate the style of the original Pali texts selected for translation here.

Three months after the Buddha's *Parinirvana* (death), a Council of the disciples closely associated with him was held, at which all his teaching, discourses and rules of discipline, as they were remembered, were recited, approved as authentic, and classified into five Collections, called *Nikayas*, which constitute the *Tipitaka* (Triple Canon). These Collections were entrusted to various Theras or Elders and to their pupillary succession for oral transmission for the benefit of future generations.

In order to perpetuate an unbroken and authentic oral transmission, regular and systematic recitation is necessary. It must be particularly noted that this recitation was not the act of a single individual alone, but of a group. The purpose of this mode of collective recitation was to keep the texts intact, free from change, modification or interpolation. If one member of the group forgot a word, another would remember it; or if one modified, added or omitted a word or a phrase, another would correct him. In this way, it was hoped, nothing could be changed, modified, added or omitted. Texts handed down through an unbroken oral tradition of this kind were considered more reliable and authentic than any record of the teachings set down by a single individual alone many years after the death of their promulgator. The teachings of the Buddha were committed to writing for the first time at a Council in the first century B.C.—held in Ceylon four centuries after his death. Up to that time, the whole of the *Tipitaka* had been handed down from generation to generation in this unbroken oral tradition.

The original texts are in Pali, a language soft, melodious and smooth-flowing. Their frequent repetitions, the use of categories, not only help memorization, which is necessary for the

continuity of oral tradition, but also give them poetic beauty and charm. They use poetic rhythms and have all the grace of poetry. The recitation of these texts in the original Pali in the calm atmosphere of a tropical grove or in a monastery still produces beautiful, harmonious and serene effects. The sonorous Pali words, their grandeur, and the well-known cadence of repetitions, produce the effect, even for someone who does not know their meaning, of a solemn chant in an unknown tongue. Recitation of this kind with its conventional melodic line, was so peaceful and moving that some narratives related that the deities in the woods were sometimes fascinated and attracted by it.

In the following selections from the original Canon the repetitions are rendered in full only in some places in order to give the reader an idea of their style. In other places they are indicated by dots. I have tried to render the original Pali as closely as possible into English without offending either the sense and tone of the Buddha's words or modern English usage.

SETTING IN MOTION THE WHEEL OF TRUTH

(Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta)

(The First Sermon of the Buddha)

Thus have I heard. The Blessed One was once living in the Deer Park at Isipatana (the Resort of Seers) near Baranasi (Benares). There he addressed the group of five bhikkhus:

'Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be practised by one who has gone forth from the household life. What are the two? There is devotion to the indulgence of sense-pleasures, which is low, common, the way of ordinary people, unworthy and unprofitable; and there is devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable.

'Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata has realized the Middle Path: it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. And what is that

Middle Path . . . ? It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely, right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the Middle Path realized by the Tathagata, which gives vision, which gives knowledge, and which leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to Nibbana.

'The Noble Truth of suffering (*Dukkha*) is this: Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering—in brief, the five aggregates of attachment are suffering.

'The Noble Truth of the origin of suffering is this: It is this thirst (craving) which produces re-existence and re-becoming, bound up with passionate greed. It finds fresh delight now here and now there, namely, thirst for sense-pleasures; thirst for existence and becoming; and thirst for non-existence (self-annihilation).

'The Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering is this: It is the complete cessation of that very thirst, giving it up, renouncing it, emancipating oneself from it, detaching oneself from it.

'The Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering is this: It is simply the Noble Eightfold Path, namely right view; right thought; right speech, right action; right livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness; right concentration.

' "This is the Noble Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*)": such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before. "This suffering, as a noble truth, should be fully understood": such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before. "This suffering, as a noble truth, has been fully understood": such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before.

' "This is the Noble Truth of the Origin of suffering": such was the vision . . . "This Origin of suffering, as a noble truth, should be abandoned" : such was the vision, . . . "This Origin of suffering, as a noble truth, has been abandoned": such was the vision, . . . with regard to things not heard before.

"This is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering": such was the vision . . . "This Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, should be realized": such was the vision, . . . "This Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been realized": such was the vision, . . . with regard to things not heard before.

' "This is the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of suffering": such was the vision, . . . "This Path leading to the Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, should be followed (cultivated)": such was the vision, . . . "This Path leading to the Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, has been followed (cultivated)": such was the vision, the knowledge, the wisdom, the science, the light, that arose in me with regard to things not heard before.

'As long as my vision of true knowledge was not fully clear in these three aspects, in these twelve ways, regarding the Four Noble Truths,¹ I did not claim to have realized the perfect Enlightenment that is supreme in the world with its gods, with its Maras and Brahmas, in this world with its recluses and brahmanas, with its princes and men. But when my vision of true knowledge was fully clear in these three aspects, in these twelve ways, regarding the Four Noble Truths, then I claimed to have realized the perfect Enlightenment that is supreme in the world with its gods, its Maras and Brahmas, in this world with its recluses and brahmanas, with its princes and men. And a vision of true knowledge arose in me thus: My heart's deliverance is unassailable. This is the last birth. Now there is no more re-becoming (rebirth).

This the Blessed One said. The group of five bhikkhus was glad, and they rejoiced at his words.

(Samyutta-nikaya, LVI, n)

¹As may be seen from the four preceding paragraphs, with regard to each of the Four Noble Truths there are three aspects of knowledge: 1. The knowledge that it is the Truth (*sacca-nana*) 2. The knowledge that a certain function or action with regard to this Truth should be performed (*kicca-nana*), and 3. The knowledge that that function or action with regard to this Truth has been performed (*kata-hana*). When these three aspects are applied to each of the Four Noble Truths, twelve ways are obtained.