

Buddhist Broadcast Talks

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Buddhist Publication Society

Kandy-Sri Lanka

First Edition: 1974

Second Edition: 1983

The Wheel Publication Nos. 197/198

as proofed, edited
and
re-formatted
by
David Dale Holmes

The Message of the Dhammapada

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It gives me great pleasure to inaugurate a new series of talks entitled “Message of the Dhammapada.” Before I deal with the contents of the Dhammapada, I would wish to dwell a little on the Dhammapada in general.

The literature of the world abounds in garlands of verses or anthologies as they are called, some of which are read and re-read for the pleasure they yield.

I venture to think that in the entire field of the world’s literature, there is no anthology so rich with beauty of expression happily blending with beauty of thought, so fascinating with its terse eloquence, so instructive with its practical wisdom, so universal in its appeal, so inspiring, so elevating as the Dhammapada which is the oldest anthology in the world.

The Dhammapada is a collection of 423 beautiful stanzas and forms part of the Khuddaka-Nikáya which as you may perhaps be aware is one of the divisions of the Tripitaka.

How fascinating these Pali stanzas must have been to foreign scholars, can be gauged from the fact which is not widely known, that long, long before they had been translated into Sinhalese, they had found their way into several languages of the West.

As far back as 1855, these exquisite stanzas had been translated into Latin by Fausboll and a second edition of this translation appeared within five years of the first. In 1860 Professor Albrecht Weber published a German version in an Orientalist journal, which was the

first translation of the Dhammapada into a living Western language, in 1870, Professor Max Muller translated it into English and it was included in the 10th Volume of the series entitled *Sacred Books of the East*. It ran into two editions within seven years.

In 1893, K. E. Neumaun translated the Dhammapada into German verse. The original Pali text was published by the Pali Text Society in 1914 and F. L. Woodward's translation into English verse appeared in 1921.

These and other translations of the Dhammapada by both Eastern and Western scholars would seem to indicate in what high esteem the book had been held by scholars of Buddhism.

It was not only in the past that the Dhammapada attracted the attention of translators. Coming to recent times we have in 1936 a revised version of Professor Max Muller's translation by Professor Irving Babbitt of the Harvard University, and one to the credit of the Venerable Nárada Mahá Thera. It must be mentioned that he was the first scholar in Ceylon to come out with an accurate English prose translation of the Dhammapada.

That was in 1940. The latest translation is by Professor Radakrishnan (1950) who in his preface says that the Dhammapada has an appeal to the modern world because its central theme is that "human conduct, righteous behaviour, reflection and meditation are more important than vain speculation about the transcendent."

There have, of course, also been many more recent translations, both here and abroad, but we cannot discuss them all here.

It is encouraging, however, to find that today in Ceylon the value of the Dhammapada is being increasingly appreciated. Series of

sermons on its various stanzas are frequently arranged, books are published containing an abridged account of the Dhammapada Commentary both in English and in Sinhalese, and a well-known Buddhist Society is conducting annual “Dhammapada examinations” and awarding prizes in order to encourage the Buddhist youth of Sri Lanka in the study of the Dhammapada.

Foreign scholars of Buddhism are of opinion (an opinion not shared by local scholars) that not all the verses of the Dhammapada could be attributed to the Buddha. Nevertheless they are all of the view that even if some of the verses do not reproduce the very words of the Buddha, they correctly reflect the true spirit of his teaching.

To a world such as we find ourselves in today, a world lacking in the fundamentals of sane living, a world lacking in right perspective and balanced judgement, a world intoxicated with a passion for power, for money, for the gratification of the senses, what is more important is not the origin, of the Dhammapada but the message of the Dhammapada, for its value lies in its rich contents.

Containing as it does, the concentrated essence of Buddhist ideals and principles, it is a book of wisdom for all times and all persons. The wisdom of the Tripitaka is crystallised into these 423 stanzas each of which is a sermon in itself.

It is a book which speaks not to one man or one country, but to humanity throughout the ages. Indeed its appeal is universal. The Dhammapada is a gospel with a timeless message. It is a message of hope and good cheer to the dejected and sorrow-stricken, a message of wisdom to the ignorant, a message of caution to the unwary, a message of gentle reproach and sympathetic guidance to the sinner and a message of appreciation and encouragement to those who are

already treading the correct path.

While pointing out the dangers of an indolent irreligious life, it holds before us a clear prospect and a bright picture of the beauty and grandeur of the spiritual life.

Of course, to enjoy the Dhammapada to its fullest, one must read it in its original mellifluous Pali, the glorious beauty of which some translators have failed fully to capture.

As an example of the terse elegance for which the Dhammapada is famed, I would refer you to the 360th and 361st stanzas which have a special appeal and a special beauty of their own.

It is said that the constant conscious and deliberate repetition of any word or words connoting any quality of mind helps us considerably to imbibe that quality.

In like manner, it will be observed by any one who cares to do so, that the constant repetition of these two stanzas—with understanding of course—produces a very composing effect on the mind, for these stanzas deal with composure and the beauty and power of restraint in all aspects and directions.

In simple straightforward language they express a plain truth namely that restraint of the eye is *sádhu* (i.e. good), that restraint of the ear is *sádhu* (i e. good) etc., and the sound of the words expressing this idea carries with it the very suggestion of composure. Repeat these stanzas a number of times with deliberate and conscious articulation and you will see the effect for yourselves: –

Cakkhuná saívaro sádhu, sádhu sotena saívaro

Ghánena saívaro sádhu. sádhu jivháya saívaro

Káyena saívaro sádhu, sádhu vácáya saívaro

Manasa saívaro sádhu, sádhu sabbattha saívaro

Sabbattha saívuto bhikkhu, sabba dukkha pamuccati.

Good is restraint in eye-good is restraint in ear

Good is restraint in nose-good is restraint in tongue

Good is restraint in body-good is restraint in speech

Good is restraint in mind-good is restraint in everything

The monk restrained in everything-is from every sorrow freed.

For a message of sturdy self-reliance, for a message indicative of the great power within ourselves for good or for bad, for an emphatic pointer to the fact that no one in this wide world can help us or harm us so much as our own very selves, can one find anything comparable to the 165th stanza?

Attaná va kataí pápaí, attaná saðkilissati

Attaná akataí pápaí, attanáva visujjhati

Suddhi asuddhi paccattaí., nañño aññaí visodhaya.

By oneself alone is evil done, by oneself alone is one defiled,

By oneself alone is evil avoided, by oneself alone is one

purified,

Purity and impurity depend on oneself, None can purify another.

The great truth that craving is at the bottom of all sorrows and fears that afflict the human mind and that if we wish to be free from sorrow and fear we should rid ourselves of craving is beautifully expressed in the 216th stanza:

Taóháya jayati soko, taóháya jayati bhayaí

Taóháya vippamuttassa, natthi soko, kuto bhayaí.

From craving springs grief, from craving springs fear,
For one fully freed from craving, there is no grief,
whence fear?

Each stanza in the Dhammapada brings out some special remedy for some particular ill, and is a message to some particular individual, a special “prescription” designed to cure the special trouble of some one tossed about in the ocean of samsara.

I cannot better conclude this talk on the message of the Dhammapada than by repeating the words of the Venerable Bhikkhu Kassapa found in his Foreword to the Venerable Bhikkhu Nárada’s translation of the Dhammapada:

“If I were to name any book, from the whole Tipiṭaka, as having been of most service to me, I should without hesitation choose

the Dhammapada. And it goes without saying that, to me, it is the single book in all the wide world of literature. For forty years, and more, it has been my constant companion and never failing solace in every kind of misfortune and grief. There is not a trouble that man is heir to, for which the Lord over sorrow cannot point out cause and prescribe sure remedy. One never turns in vain to these stanzas of incomparable beauty for advice, for alleviation of life's manifold pains, or for message of cheer and