

The World Buddhist University Sunday Forum

The Earliest Texts Of The Pali Canon



Date & Time : December 6, 2552(2009), 12:00 – 13.30 : P.M.
Speaker : Dr. Peter Dennis Masefield
Moderator Dr. Chris Stanford
Rapporteur Suttinee Yavaprapas

Dr. Peter Dennis Masefield did his thesis on the Pali texts of the Pali Canon for 7 years. During his post graduate studies of the University of Lancaster, he was approached by the Pali Text society to revise the English of a translation of the Petavatu commentary. At that time, there was nobody who had the ability to translate full time. By that time Peter finished the second translation, he thought he knew a little bit of Pali language. He then translated the commentary on Vimanavatu, which is the opposite book of Petavatu with the scholarship in New Zealand. After that he translated the Buddhana, Adiudhana commentary and more recently in the Itivuttaka commentary. So he had been working in the field of Pali studies for the last 35 years. Everyday he realizes what he knew for certain yesterday was no longer certain. What we all take for granted when we were young was questionable. The more we learn, the less we know.

Peter said what we know about Theravada on the earliest form of Buddhism might be different. Modern studies are going to reveal that the Theravada are only going back to the fourth century A.D. as a breakaway movement from the Mahayana movement at the Narathapura, then the capital of Sri Lanka. Everyday assumes quite uncritically that the Theravada is the original form of Buddhism. It may be or may be not. Relating to the Pali language, the word "Pali" never means the Language. The word Pali for the commentaries means the Tipitika. Was the Pali canon ever written in Pali? Did the Buddha speak Pali? No!!!!!!

What we have in the text is a translation of the earliest text from some unknown language into a western practice of India which is not the same as the mother tongue of the Buddha. When we look at the Buddhist studies, how do we get the knowledge of Buddhism. It is a very unfortunate fact that Buddhism is largely the product of the colonial Raj in Sri Lanka, a colony of England. The first founding president of the Pali text society was himself a circuit judge under the British Raj in Sri Lanka. He went on a tour around Sri Lanka hearing trials. Somebody produced the documents in an unknown language, the Pali language which awakened his interest. In the end, he founded a Pali Text Society.

The Victorian era in England was very anti-religion. Charles Darwin challenged the book of genesis. It was a place and a time where nobody was really interested in religion. These people in the Raj of India and Sri Lanka found in Buddhism a religion which did not require a belief in supernatural. Nobody ever studied cosmology in Buddhism except for the Christian missionaries who wanted to replace their local beliefs with Christianity. In order to covert somebody, we had to understand what they really believed. So they had in Buddhism a religion without supernatural. The British was in charge of the school teaching for the Sri Lankans about Buddhism. Today,

we have several generations of people who are educated by the British telling the Sri Lankan Buddhists what their religion was all about. What we have to do is to go back to the original texts. We have to learn and understand all the nuances of what was going on in the background rather than the wishful thinking of certain late Victorian scholars in Sri Lanka who imposed their own religious beliefs on Buddhism. Unfortunately, Thailand was copying the Sri Lankans as in the word "Ariya." "Ariya truth" "Ariya Sajja" "Ariya Marga" have been translated by scholars in the West as "noble." This is very Victorian. It is the noble thing to do.

No! Ariya in Pali means the same as what is meant for Hitler. It is the supreme master. There are many different translations that were designed from early in the career of Buddhist studies on the West. It is a Pali misleading translation of words which had very significant nuances. There are many Pali words that have Sanskrit equivalence of two different terms. "Bodhisatva" in Sanskrit is the mistranslation of Pali word Bhodisatta attached to body not to enlightenment. When we try to understand Buddhism, we can only understand the technical language of the Pali text. If we also look at the background of the other religious traditions of the time, the titles of the Buddha, "Tatagatha" and "Mahavira" etc. are all in common with the other sects.

Peter then talked about a few household truths: the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path or the tenfold path. These are only a vision of Nibbana. The eightfold noble path starts with Samadhiti with right view. We only have a problem on "How do you have a path? The path cannot take you to a vision of Nibbana. Peter said his first problem in his research was "How do you get this vision of Nibbana?" The Western scholars try to cheat. They say it starts with the right morality (Samasila),. We all practice right morality to get Samadhiti. No! That is not the text story. If it starts with Samasila, then where is the end of the path? It is not Samadhiti but Samasangappa or right renunciation. No!!! The Buddhist Path starts with Samadhiti with the question, "How do you get right view?" Is right view meaning the same as the vision of Nibbana- a vision of impermanence. His thesis is the people obtain right view by moral imitation by the Buddha himself. The Buddha has to spend thousands and thousands of lives perfecting the perfections to become a teaching Buddha.

The Buddha at first thought nobody in the world could understand his teaching. Brahmashampati intervened and said there would be a few to accept his theory. The Buddha's mission was never a universal mission, It was not clickable to anybody but only to select a few who had the ability to catch on what the Buddha taught them. He then talked about a leper who was never allowed to join the Sangha in India.

"So was there heard by me on one occasion when the Lord was staying at Rajagaha, in the squirrels' Feeding ground in Jeta's Grove And on that occasion, there was in Rajagaha a leper named Suppabuddha, one of the poorest of men, one who suffered the greatest human hardship, the meanest of the men. Moreover, on that occasion, the Lord was seated teaching Dhamma surrounded by a great assembly.

Now, Suppabuddha the leper saw, even from afar, that great body of people that had congregated and, upon seeing (the thought) occurred to him: "Without doubt either some hard or soft food is being distributed here. Maybe I should approach that great body of people, since I may perhaps acquire some hard or soft food here."

Suppabuddha the leper approached that great body of people. Then, Suppabuddha the leper saw the Lord seated teaching Dhamma surrounded by a great assembly, (Whereupon this thought) occurred to him: "Neither hard nor soft food is being distributed here; this is the recluse Gotama teaching Dhamma in an assembly. And, thinking "What if I also were to hear Dhamma," seated himself on the fringe of that assembly thinking that he too would hear Dhamma.

Then the Lord with his own mind embraced and attended to the mind of that all-inclusive assembly, wondering if there were anyone capable of perceiving Dhamma. And the Lord saw Suppabuddha the leper seated on the fringe of that assembly; and, upon seeing him, thought: "This one here is capable of perceiving Dhamma. So, for the sake of Suppabuddha the leper, he talked a progressive talk, i.e, talk on morality, talk on heaven, and then made manifest the peril, the degradation, the corruption, of sense-desires, and the advantage in renouncing same. And when the Lord knew Suppabuddha the leper to be of ready heart, of malleable heart, with a heart

devoid of the hindrances, of uplifted heart, of devout heart, then did the Lord make manifest that Dhamma teaching that the Buddhas have themselves discovered—dukkha, uprising, cessation, (and) the path. And just as a clean cloth from which the black specks have departed might properly accept the dye, even so did the dustless, stainless Dhammacakkhu arise to Suppabuddha the leper whilst seated on that very same seat, viz. that whatever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease.

Then Suppabuddha the leper, as one who had seen Dhamma, as one who had reached Dhamma, as one who had fathomed Dhamma, as one who had plunged into Dhamma, as one who had crossed over doubt, as one from whom inquisitive talk had departed, as one who had reached confidence, as one not relying on another as to the Teacher's Teaching, rose from his seat and approached the lord. And having approached, he saluted the lord and then seated himself to one side. And so seated to one side, Suppabuddha the leper said this to Lord: "It is wonderful, Lord. It is as if lord one might set upright that which had been overturned, or had revealed that which was hidden, or pointed out the path to one who had gone astray, or had brought an oil-lamp into the darkness so that those with eyes might see material forms; even so has Dhamma been made manifest in countless ways by the Lord. This same I, Lord, am going to Lord as refuge, to the Dhamma and the Bhikkhusangha; may the Lord accept me as a lay follower, as one gone, beginning with today for refuge whilst furnished with life's breath." Then Suppabuddha the leper, having had something indicated to him by the Lord by way of dhamma-talk, having been made to take it up, having been whetted, having been made to bristle with joy, having rejoiced at that spoken by the Lord, and shown right, and then departed, when a cow with a year-old calf collided with Suppabuddha the leper and deprived him of life.

In the Pali text, whether or not, these are representations of the real Buddhist teachings and may only stem from the fourth century A.D. as somebody who taught only the selected few. The Tipitika, one of the basic texts of the Pali canon, implied with the conversion of Suppabuddha, the last convert. Having converted Suppabuddha, the Lord attended Nirvana.

In sum, the Pali canon compiled by the Buddha's contemporaries immediately following his death, reveal that in his own day the Buddha and his mission were regarded quite differently to the manner in which they are presented today. Far from being seen as one teaching a means to liberation open to all to follow, he was instead regarded—as is still the typical Indian guru—as one imparting liberating teachings only to those few whom he deemed capable of benefiting therefrom.

Such teachings were imparted through an oral progressive revelation, culminating in a vision of the goal, Nirvana, being communicated to the convert, as a result of which the latter was not only severed from his past karma, both good and bad, but also spiritually reborn onto the supermundane path which, since it prevented further accumulation of karma, guaranteed attainment of liberation from rebirth.

To those deemed incapable of such attainment, a totally different teaching was given, encouraging the accumulation of good karma through cultic acts of charity to the Buddha and his chosen few, who now claimed to represent the true seat of the Vedic sacrifice and to be those through whom that sacrifice could alone acquire efficacy.