

Suttas and Marriage

by Piya Tan

Although early Buddhism has its own scripture—the Tipitaka (the Three Collections) — which is about 11 times the size of the Christian Bible, not many Buddhists really know it. Not as well as a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim would know their holy book, anyway.

One reason for the average Buddhist not knowing his Tipitaka can be attributed to the fact that early Buddhism is a “religion of truth” while the others (including some later Buddhisms) are “religions of the book.” One important difference between them is that as a religion of truth, early Buddhism teaches a “direct experience” of true reality.

Early Buddhism clearly exhorts us to keep the precepts so that our body and speech are “right,” that is, conducive to mental cultivation (or samadhi), which in turn, with its calm and clarity clears away our wrong views. When we transcend all views, we awaken to liberation and true happiness.

We all need to work in some way to support ourselves. We need to know and do our work well to succeed or at least earn a living. Let’s say, we use computers in our work. Keeping the precepts is like learning how to use the computer and taking care of it, so that it works well. Mental cultivation is like using the computer effectively in our work, even enjoying it. And wisdom is like our finished work.

We could then go on a short holiday or enjoy our weekend: this is like becoming a streamwinner. When all our work is successfully done, and we finally retire, so that we can enjoy on our huge retirement funds in any happy way we want to: this is like being an arhat.

But before that, we need to get our work done first. As practising Buddhists, we can begin our work by first looking for some right sutta or early discourse to reflect on. Instead of saying, “This sutta is difficult,” we should say, “Which parts of this sutta do I understand or enjoy.” We should go on looking until we find a sutta or sutta passage that we like. (Many such sutta translations with notes are found on <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com>.)

Next, when we feel a sense of peace on reading a sutta or sutta passage, we cultivate that happiness. We remember how this FEELS and relate this to the happiness of other such sutta encounters. This gives us a growing sense of inner peace and joy. This is the zest or joyful energy with which I have been translating the Pali suttas since 2003, working with it as naturally and happily as being able to breathe freely.

Some texts, like the Mulapariyaya Sutta (“On the Root Teaching”) (M 1), are difficult to translate, but I have done it, complete with notes. How do I do this? Let me tell this with a story. In our faith in the Dharma, we often feel like doing “something” for Buddhism, say, building a beautiful big temple where we can meet, study, meditate and enjoy the peace.

But the moment we lift the first tool or brick to build a temple wall or pillar, we find it too heavy or too difficult, and simply give up! “Very cheem [profound]!” and we give up on the suttas. This is like trying to start a happy family and complaining that it is too difficult to find the right partner.

But it is rare that we FIND a right partner: this is like an arranged marriage. Rather, the better way is to MAKE right partnership. Or more generally, we should understand this: the best friends are not found--they are made. This is the secret of a happy marriage: learning about each other, like two rough stones rubbing against each other, until they smoothly fit together.

Our relationship with the Buddha’s suttas can be compared to a happy marriage. We begin by patiently courting the suttas, show them our attention and love. However, unlike a marriage partner, the suttas will never give up on us—they remain with us FOR LIVES. For, they are records of the spiritual journey of our Teacher, the Buddha.

It is all right if our journey is slow: as long as we keep moving; each small step brings us nearer to our destination. When we find a rock on the path, we remove it. If it is a big rock, we get other travelers to help. If it is simply too big, we find a way around it. And a sutta will be happily waiting for you on the other side. Otherwise, we will be left far behind as “cheem-sayers.”

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