

Translating Suttas is very enjoyable

by Piya Tan

What is the difference between the Sutta Discovery (SD) translation series and scholarly academic works? There are some people who quip that the SD translation is “academic.” If they have not study these notes at all, then I suppose they are not interested in the Suttas, or maybe they think I’m not qualified to translate the texts.

So, who is qualified to translate the Suttas (or even *a* Sutta)? Notice the operative word, *qualified*. If we ask who *can* translate the Suttas, I suppose the answer is that anyone *can* try to. In fact, if you spend some time at the Buddhism section of any large bookshops, you may notice that many of the writers or “translators” are not Buddhists.

The Dhammapada, for example, has been translated over 50 times to date! And not all the “translators” are practising Buddhists or even know Pali. Some of the trickiest verses (and I mean cryptic, even ironic) of the Pali are found in the Dhammapada. (Compare the translations, especially of **Dh 97**, and you might be amazed at how each have effectively written their *own* Dhammapada!) One reason for publishing such works in English is because Buddhist books are selling well today as Buddhism has become a global religion.

My interest in the Suttas started when I was an adolescent, seeking to study *all* the sacred texts of *all* the world’s religions. I enjoyed this while the interest lasted, which was some 45 years ago. My first interest was the Bible, since my brother (forcibly converted when he was young) then ran a Gospel chapel.

Soon I realized that the Bible is mostly *stories*, which people consciously or unconsciously take to be facts. In due course, I found that **religion** is mostly *stories inspiring how we can be good*, and also how to *believe* in a certain system and not others. I began to look beyond stories and blind faith.

My first taste of the Suttas was not very sweet. The long unbroken and repetitive passages were difficult reading. So in mid-secondary school, I convinced my school teachers to switch me from the science stream to the arts stream—so that I could master English better. I did not say I planned to be a monk in due course: they might think I was unhinged or had a complex.

Anyway, my determination to know the Buddha’s Suttas was strong. One reason is that the evangelists were constantly bullying and insulting us, even doing it on our sacred temple premises! My favourite reply was that it was God’s will that I am a Buddhist!

But when I joined the Thai order, I had to study Thai first, because at that time (in the 1970s), there was no Pali courses in English easily available. In fact, I wished I had mastered Burmese and Sinhalese, too (perhaps next life). After the minimum 5 years of monastic training and Pali, I returned to Malaysia, and began teaching.

A great change occurred when my family and I were invited to live in Singapore in 1999. When the NUSBS (Feb **2002**) invited me to teach them Suttas, I was delighted. But

soon we found the available translations were difficult to read, and lacked study notes. So I started preparing my own translation with notes, something like one Sutta a week.

Then the Buddhist Fellowship (Feb **2003**), too, invited me to run weekly Sutta Discovery classes. By then, I had already been systematically producing a volume of annotated Sutta every 4 months. In **2004**, this was reduced to every 3 months, so that the volume is not too thick. These Sutta classes have continued unbroken to this very day.

One way to envision the Sutta Discovery series is that *it is like a cross between Reader's Digest and a learned journal*. First, I read up all the available English translations of the Sutta at hand, so that I do not duplicate what is already very good and give them due credit. Then, I look up all the journal articles and writings I can find on that Sutta (and often communicating with the scholars themselves).

Then, I translate the text directly from the Pali, at times, checking all the Pali readings from whatever manuscripts (Thai, Burmese, Sinhalese, European, even Sanskrit parallels). Thanks to the computer, IT and internet, all this are now easily done. Wherever possible, I paragraph, title and number them into sections, subsections, even lines, for easy reading, but I keep the repetitions intact where they serve a spiritual purpose (as Xuanzang did).

Then comes an enjoyable phase: we study these annotated translations at the NUSBS, the BF and other centres where I teach Suttas (often regularly over four days of the week). This helps to weed out typos and improve the Sutta notes. The joyful peace on the audience's faces is a reward in itself.

The main reason I have been consistently translating and teaching the Pali Suttas is that it is such a joyful thing to do, and to bring happiness to others, with the *real thing*. It's a simple choice: live my life by listening to others' opinions and jokes in talks, or master the Living Word of the Buddha directly.

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