

The days of Dharma

by Piya Tan

Next year I will be 60 years old or 12 cycles. If current statistics are reliable, and the playing field is level, as they say, then I have about 25 more years to go, that is, I may die around 85. But life is uncertain and is a terminal case.

During the last six years (beginning February 2002), I have completed working on 24 volumes of the Sutta Discovery (excluding offprints). Each bound volume is about 180 pages, and appears every three months. That's over 4300 A4 pages. This is partly due to the fact that I have been generally healthy throughout that period (and my young children wonder why!) I like to tell them that practising Buddhism is fun and cuts down stress.

Despite such blessings, the Sutta translation work is a constant uphill task. I work practically alone. It is not easy to find assistants here in such an unglamourously specialized area. The reality is that if you really want to work on something as visionary as making the Buddha Word a tool for awakening in this life, you are on your own.

I constantly remind myself that just before the Buddha's awakening, even the five monks left him. He struggled on alone: if he had given up to the "rightness" of the majority, we would have no Buddha Dharma today.

So what is it that has pushed me on to work on this impossible task almost all alone. ("Almost," because my loving wife Ratna is a great help to me in her own way.) There are a couple of important reasons that motivate me to work on the Sutta translations.

An important point is that not everyone believes that the Suttas can help them, that they are "cheem" (difficult), much less that they can awaken in this life. As such, not many Buddhists bother to study the Tipitaka carefully. Often enough, those who publicly talk on Buddhism do not properly quote the Buddha or the Tipitaka. Very often, they are merely stating their own opinions, or quoting some successful people, or entertaining the audience. Sometimes, they even say that the Suttas are not important. What is Buddhism without the Suttas? What teaching are we giving? What happens when you really need help?

The reality is that *the Suttas are the best spiritual help you can find, and we can awaken in this life.*

I have been able to keep up a daily routine of Sutta work (besides running classes and taking care of my family) because *I deeply enjoy doing it*. It is fun translating the Suttas: it is like discovering a new Egyptian tomb or a valley of lost treasure over and again.

As I pore over the Suttas, their words come alive and the ancient puzzle pieces begin to fit, and new angles and visions of the Dharma appear before me. I feel as I am a wide-eyed child left all alone in my father's toy and chocolate superstore! In fact, I am now convinced you and I can awaken in this life itself (see the Okkanti Vagga, Samyutta ch 25).

With such good news how can I not enjoy teaching the Suttas to any who would listen?

Speaking of last days, beginning this Wednesday (19 March) we will examine the last days of the Buddha and remind ourselves of the important instructions he has given us.

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