



MAPPING the BUDDHIST LANDSCAPE

IN THE BUDDHA'S WORDS: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon

Edited and introduced by Bhikkhu Bodhi

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There are two ways of looking at any work of Buddhist literature, whether it is ancient or modern. One is to view it from the outside, so to speak, as an object situated in its historical and cultural milieu. The other, more inward, perspective is to regard its potential transformative effect upon its readers. The objective view is of particular interest to the intellectual, the academic, and the critic, while the more subjective view is the chief concern of the Buddhist practitioner. From either one of these perspectives, this new work by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, is a remarkable book.

Starting with its context, we might say that this anthology is a capstone to one

of the three English translations of the Tipitaka, or Pali Canon, that are currently available, each of which has its particular strengths and limitations. The first consists of the Pali Text Society translations which have been generated over the past century by some of Buddhism's foremost scholars, including T. W. Rhys Davids and his wife Caroline Rhys Davids, I. B. Horner, F. L. Woodward, and E. M. Hare. There is, however, much diversity in their rendering of technical vocabulary (e.g., are *asavas* Deadly Floods, cankers, Drugs or Poisons, intoxicants, influxes, or effluents?), and an antiquated feel to some of the English usage (e.g., "Yea, as thou say'st then wast thou, Bhaggava!"). There is also some question about whether the "academic objectivity" of a brilliant, Christian, nonmeditating linguist is the best mode in which to attempt to render material of such subtle interiority as the Buddha's dhamma.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu is gradually working towards an alternative English translation of the Pali Canon, and each new text he translates is published for free distribution and placed on the Internet (accesstoinsight.org) for free downloading. Because of their preference for working in cyberspace, the younger generation of dhamma enthusiasts is widely using this version of the Tipitaka. But those more familiar with the vernacular that is current in dhamma circles struggle with some of his idiosyncratic word choices (e.g., "stress" for *dukkha*, "frame of reference" for *satipatthana*, "Unbinding" for *nibbana*). It's not to say that these are not excellent choices once one understands the reasoning, but unless or until his canon becomes more widely adopted, many readers will tend to stub their toes upon some of these terms. Thanissaro clearly knows his tradition well, and adds to his work the important dimension of experiential depth.

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The third English translation of the Pali Canon consists largely, but not exclusively, of the texts put out by Wisdom Publications in the last decade or so. Walshe's *Long Discourses*, Nanamoli's *Middle Length Discourses*, and Bhikkhu Bodhi's *Connected Discourses* and *Numerical Discourses*, along with some freelance translations from the fifth *Nikaya*, or collection, have come to form a coherent and reasonably consistent body of work of considerable usefulness to the modern reader. The translations in this series benefit from solid Pali scholarship, lucid contemporary English prose, and the sensitive understanding of seasoned meditation practitioners. *In the Buddha's Words* is an anthology drawing primarily on these first four *Nikayas*, and manages quite successfully to both summarize them and extract their essence.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says of this remarkable body of literature in his preface, "These texts, along with their counterparts, constitute the most ancient records of the Buddha's teachings available to us; they are the closest we can come to what the historical Buddha Gotama himself actually taught." They are valuable, he goes on to say, because "They constitute the common heritage of the entire Buddhist tradition, and Buddhists of all schools who wish to understand the taproot of the Dharma should make a close and careful study of them a priority."

Although this material has been available in good English translations for some time now, one of the things that has remained a difficulty for many readers is its complexity and scope. As Bhikkhu Bodhi puts the matter in his preface, even students familiar with the texts "still grappled for a standpoint from which to see the suttas' overall structure, a framework within which they all fit

together. The *Nikayas* themselves do not offer much help in this respect, for their arrangement ... appears almost haphazard." The singular strength of *In the Buddha's Words* is that it provides such a framework, and, moreover, it does so in a skillful, almost inspired way.

The value of any anthology lies in what it includes and does not include, as well as in the scheme selected to organize the material. "This scheme," says our translator and editor, "unfolds the Buddha's message progressively, from the simple to the difficult, from the elementary to the profound." He goes on in the introduction to specify, "I here attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of the Buddha's teaching that incorporates a wide variety of suttas into an organic structure. This structure, I hope, will bring to light the intentional pattern underlying the Buddha's formulation of the Dhamma and thus provide the reader with guidelines for understanding Early Buddhism as a whole." The structure Bhikkhu Bodhi brings to the Buddha's teachings is not only apparent in the table of contents, but is outlined in an introduction to each chapter. These introductions alone, strung together, would themselves serve as a beautiful and accessible overview of the dhamma.

The work is arranged in ten chapters, each of which has a number of different subsections. The first three of these prepare the ground for a more systematic three-stage presentation of the teachings. "The Human Condition" paints a picture of the existential situation humans find themselves in, apart from the appearance of the Buddha. "The Bringer of Light" contains texts that relate to the Buddha's birth, quest, and awakening, and includes the first discourse. "Approaching the Dhamma" offers some guidelines about

what attitudes one might bring to and get from these teachings, mentioning such things as its emphasis on investigation, personal experience, and upon understanding and eliminating suffering. The fourth chapter, "The Happiness Visible in this Present Life," addresses the subject of ethics and living with others in community, while the fifth, "The Way to a Fortunate Rebirth," nudges the reader a bit beyond the immediate to matters of karma, rebirth, and the various ways of developing merit. A transitional sixth chapter, "Deepening One's Perspective on the World," draws out some of the insecurities and dangers of even our most cherished secular concerns, and points the way to four rich chapters devoted to illuminating the approach to the highest good. Chapter seven provides a good overview of its title, "The Path to Liberation," and focuses on the noble eightfold path in some detail. "Mastering the Mind," the eighth chapter, is all about monastic training, the overcoming of obstacles, and some details of meditation practice. Chapter nine contains many of the core teachings of the wisdom tradition, such as discussion of the aggregates, sense spheres, dependent origination, and the four noble truths. The final chapter, "The Planes of Realization," contains texts which elucidate the process of awakening itself, in its various stages, and helps portray the arahant and the Tathagata in ways we can begin to understand and emulate.

It is an impressive and thoroughly effective organizing pattern, and I think this anthology will rapidly become the sourcebook of choice for both neophyte and serious dhamma student alike. *In the Buddha's Words* reveals the mature understanding of someone who has not only a complete mastery of his material,

but also of someone who has deeply understood the nature and intention of the dhamma and who shares it with us as an expression of his own caring. Anyone who knows Bhikkhu Bodhi will be familiar with his humility, simplicity, dedication, and fortitude. He writes, as he lives, with great transparency, by which I mean an openness and lack of personal agenda that approaches, as closely as one is likely to find in our world, the ethos of the early generation of Buddhists.

As he writes in the preface, “Unlike the textual collections of the extinct schools of Early Buddhism, which are purely of academic interest, this collection still brims with life. It inspires the faith of millions of Buddhists from the villages and monasteries of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia to the cities and meditation centers of Europe and the Americas. It shapes their understanding, guides them in the face of difficult ethical choices, informs their meditative practices, and offers them the keys to liberating insight.” I am not well situated to comment on how this publication might impact the Buddhist communities in Asia or the Asian communities in America, but I do know that it will be very much welcomed by Western meditators and students of the dhamma.

At its most profound, the Buddha’s teaching tells us that a world of meaning is creatively rendered by each of us in every moment of experience. Frame by frame, the data of the senses is taken in by consciousness, shaped by multiple layers of disposition, and mingles with perceptions and feelings to manifest in experience as a view of one’s self in the world. How we respond to this process, each moment, is of immense importance. The intentions we create now will have a transformative effect on who we become, and by means of extensive networks of interrelationship, will also influence all those we encounter. The world is shaped by our intention, and our intention is itself wrought by our degree of wisdom.

Any amount of study or practice that helps to deepen wisdom and assist us to emerge from layers of delusion is precious. This book, *In the Buddha’s Words*, could contribute to this enterprise more directly than almost anything else in print. It gives us access to the very texture of the dhamma, the specific words and phrases, the precise verbal progressions, the identical metaphoric images—all of which guided and inspired the Buddha’s original students. And thanks to the editor’s good judgment, it also reveals the comprehensive structure of these teachings. Bhikkhu Bodhi has created a framework upon which he has placed the key elements of dhamma for all to plainly see and investigate for themselves. With a map of such clarity in hand, one may tread the landscape with confidence.

Those for whom the Buddha’s teaching is a living tradition, which is to say, those who endeavor to influence their moment-to-moment experience by mindful attention, careful investigation, wise reflection, and skillful response, will find this book to be a dear friend and spiritual companion. Whether at the beginning, the middle, or the end of one’s path of transformation, whether one is immersed in the dusty world or has only a little dust remaining in their eye, there will always be more to find in these pages for one who continues to look. My overall response to the work is one of gratitude—to the author, the translator and editor, the publisher, and all the other helpers and benefactors who have contributed to making this gift to the world. 