Selections from the Buddha's Discourses

A Concise Compilation of Excerpts from the Pāli Canon

Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu
Edited by Stephen D'Arcy

Produced for use at Huron University College
in Philosophy 020E and Philosophy 201F/G

Selections from the Buddha's Discourses: A Concise Compilation of Excerpts from the Pāli Canon

Version 1.0 (November 2004)

Translations from Pali
by Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu
(Abbot, Mettā Forest Monastery)

Compilation and Editorial Materials
by Stephen D'Arcy
(Department of Philosophy, Huron University College)

Bibliographical Information:
Thanissaro, Bhikkhu, trans. *Selections from the Buddha's Discourses: A Concise Compilation of Excerpts from the Pāli Canon*. Ed. Stephen D'Arcy. London, Ontario: 2004. <geocities.com/s_j_darcy/selections.pdf>.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This compilation of excerpts from the Pali Canon has been produced for the use of philosophy students in the first or second year of their undergraduate studies. In principle, reading *Selections from the Buddha's Discourses* should require no particular background knowledge, expertise, or experience with Buddhism of any kind. However, the texts are in some ways difficult to read and there are important pieces of background information that may be useful to readers. So this Introduction has been prepared as a supplement, which may help you achieve more quickly and more completely a good understanding of the selections themselves.

Feel free to skip this Introduction and go straight to the selections from the Buddha's discourses, if you so wish.

(a) What is the Pāli Canon?

The Buddha's discourses were delivered orally, memorized by Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis (monks and nuns), transmitted for centuries by oral tradition, and then finally transcribed in the Pali language around 100BCE, approximately 400 years after the Buddha's death. Together, these discourses, along with some other "canonical" commentaries and other early Buddhists texts compiled with the discourses, comprise the Pali Canon, the scriptural basis for Buddhism. (For details about the Pali Canon, visit the web site: <www.accesstoinsight.org>.)

The Buddha's discourses survive in a form that shows two notable characteristics. On the one hand, we find the routine use of mnemonic devices or memorization aids, such as repetition, numbered lists, and standardized formulas – all of which suggest that the practicalities involved in the process of oral transmission affected the content of the discourses to *some* extent, so that what survives must not quite

be a verbatim transcription. On the other hand, we also find a remarkable degree of conceptual, thematic and narrative unity, strongly suggesting that the ideas, and a great deal of the wording, originates from a single source, a single "author," as one would now say: the Buddha himself.

So, it seems appropriate to view the surviving Pali discourses as an authentic record, albeit not a strictly verbatim one, of the teachings of Siddhattha Gotama, the historical Buddha

As such their importance would be hard to overestimate. The impact of Siddhattha Gotama (560-480BCE), the Buddha, on human culture has been, and continues to be, enormous. Born in what is now known as Nepal, his ideas dramatically transformed the philosophical and religious thinking of much of Asia.

For us, today, it is perhaps just as important to see that what the Buddha tries to say still speaks to the predicament of modern humanity in a uniquely challenging way. The "possessive individualism" that serves as the fundamental framework in terms of which we are encouraged to think about our hopes and aspirations and our place in the world is anticipated and subjected to ruthless critical analysis by the Buddha. In essence, he argues that something we tend to regard as obvious – that if we get more of what we want, and less of what we don't want, our lives will get better – is not only an inadequate basis for leading a satisfying life; it is, on the contrary, the most basic cause of human suffering and disappointment. In place of this doomed strategy, based on craving, the Buddha proposes a kind of radical reversal, a *revolution* (that is, to borrow an expression from the Pali discourses, a "turning of the wheel"): we can find happiness not by singling out something that we don't have, and then seeking to get one's hands on it, but instead by cultivating a stance of radical acceptance of what is. Acceptance, here, does not mean embracing or endorsing what is. He does not by any means advocate just going along with the way things

are and not challenging or trying to change anything. Instead, acceptance means a clear-eyed willingness to witness the reality of what is going on: to see the suffering and say, *there is suffering*. Acceptance, as the Buddha understands it, is not a form of resignation, nor is it an affirmation of the status quo; it is a lucid, fearlessly honest witnessing of reality, wedded to a selflessly compassionate willingness to act "skillfully" to liberate all beings from suffering.

The Pali discourses, as the literary repository of this remarkable intellectual and practical undertaking, are a true treasure of human culture.

And yet, to the modern student, the Pali Canon is relatively inaccessible. It is not that good translations into modern languages are not available. They are (see Suggestions for Further Reading, at the end of this document, for references to English translations). But these translations present us with thousands of pages of dense material, much of it extremely repetitive, often obscure, and exhibiting a theoretical sophistication and complexity that really demands careful study over the course of many years. In short, it is too demanding for most students.

What is needed is a way to bring the Pali Canon closer to students, presenting the *main* ideas, *concisely* stated, and *clearly* arranged. *Selections from the Buddha's Discourses*, as a systematically organized compilation of brief excerpts from the Pali Canon, attempts to fulfill that purpose.

(b) The translations

The translations from which the excerpts in *Selections from the Buddha's Discourses* are drawn were the work of Thanissaro Bhikkhu, the Abbot of the Metta Forest Monastery. Ajahn Thanissaro is author of *Mind Like a Fire Unbound* and *Noble Strategy*, and editor of a four- volume collection of the Buddha's discourses, under the title, *A Handful of Leaves*. His translations are distributed free of charge, notably on the excellent web site to which I referred

above: <www.accesstoinsight.org>.

It is worth pointing out a few of the expressions that are translated in distinctive ways by Ven. Thanissaro.

First, *"dukkha,"* usually translated as "suffering," is here rendered as *stress*.

Second, *"Nibbana,"* which many English translators render as the untranslated Sanskrit equivalent, *"Nirvana,"* is rendered by Thanissaro as *Unbinding*, a translation that receives elaborate justification in *Mind Like a Fire Unbound*.

Third, *"kamma"* remains untranslated. Its Sanskrit equivalent, *karma*, is more familiar, and a literal English equivalent would be *action*. Thanissaro leaves it as *kamma*, and that is probably for the best. Rendering it as *karma* would encourage the equation of the Buddha's notion with the Hindu notion of karma, which is arguably more familiar to most people than the Buddha's conception of *kamma*. But rendering *kamma* as "action" would make it difficult to grasp some of the term's connotations: *kamma* is *intentional* action, which "ripens" or "comes to fruition" in a series of *results.*

(c) The selections

The choice of which excerpts to include was governed by the need to find easily understood, relatively straightforward expositions of key Buddhist concepts, such as mindfulness, absorption [*jhana*], not-self, kamma, and so on.

Another consideration has been brevity. The Pali Canon goes on for several thousands of pages, and much of it is repetitive and wordy. So, passages that "got to the point" quickly were chosen, as much as possible.

The choices in many cases overlap with other, similar anthologies, especially *Word of the Buddha*, edited by Bhikkhu Nyanatiloka, and available from the Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka. But this selection was designed to give special emphasis to ethical issues. "Cosmological" aspects of the Buddha's thought are omitted almost entirely, in favor of "existential" aspects. For example,

I omit many aspects of the "kamma" doctrine; passages encouraging a literal interpretation of "rebirth"; all reference to multiple "worlds"; and most references to "devas" (heavenly beings), "heavenly" or "hell" realms, etc.

(d) An overview of the Buddha's ethics

In spite of the effort made here to present the Buddha's ideas, in his own words, in an accessible format, a rough outline of the overall vision of the Buddha may help students more easily grasp the meaning of these ideas.

I therefore wish to summarize the main points of the Buddha's ethics, which are encapsulated in the "four noble truths."

The Buddha was born a prince, firstborn son to a local monarch in present-day Nepal. In fact, he was born with most of the things that most people believe will lead to happiness. He was powerful; he was wealthy; he was regarded as physically attractive; he was healthy; he had a spouse and children; and he lived a life of uncommon leisure, luxury and indulgence.

The Buddha was born into a life where all these things were available to him in abundance. And yet he renounced them all: his money, his power, his luxury, his expensive clothes, his family, even his name. He became instead, quite literally, a *homeless* person, a wandering beggar, pursuing spiritual insight through ascetic discipline and mental cultivation (or what we would call meditation).

Now, it is usually held that the things he renounced are precisely the things that lead to happiness. If one has power, wealth, beauty, health, a romantic relationship, a family, leisure, and luxury, one is supposed to be happy. This is the first claim he denies in the four noble truths, his most fundamental framework for articulating his insights into the good life.

The *first noble truth* is, simply, "suffering." The truth of suffering. One cannot escape suffering by gaining

wealth, by gaining power, by gaining health, and so on. The rich may be well-entertained, or widely flattered, or elaborately pampered by servants and subordinates. But, according to the Buddha, they are not at peace. They, too, suffer. (If this is basically false, then the Buddha is clearly barking up the wrong tree.) And the same holds for the powerful, the beautiful, the healthy, the loved, and so on. They, too, suffer.

This brings us to the *second noble truth*: the cause or origin of suffering.

Ironically perhaps, the cause of suffering is *craving*. In fact, it is craving for just the sorts of things that the Buddha renounced. One suffers not because one lacks power, but because one craves power: an affliction that affects those who have power at least as much as those who lack it. Similarly, one suffers not because one lacks money, or a romantic relationship, or beauty, or luxury, but because one craves these things, regardless of whether one has them. Having these things is no protection against craving them. So, according to the second noble truth, *getting* what one wants is not ultimately satisfying.

Now, I mentioned that the Buddha renounced his life of luxury and privilege. His first alternative to that life was a kind of complete reversal: rejecting the life of self-indulgence, he embraced instead a life of self-mortification, radical self-denial. According to the discourses he ate only a small amount of soup each day (see below, pp. 14-15), and nearly starved himself to death.

But what he discovered – and here it is only too easy to accept his point, since at this point he confirms our prejudices – was that self-denial was no more a path to the end of suffering than self-indulgence.

Nevertheless, there *is*, he claims, a path leading to the end of suffering: a path *between* self-indulgence and self-denial.

That there is such a possibility constitutes the *third*

noble truth: the truth of the cessation of suffering. His claim is that this is possible: that a complete cessation of suffering is possible. Obviously, one would always experience pain, as when one falls and breaks one's leg, and so on (see pp. 23). But, according to the Buddha, pain is only a cause of suffering if one craves a pain-free existence: it is not pain that makes us suffer, but attachment to the idea that one should not be in pain. Insight into the cause of suffering thus suggests that it might be possible to cease to do the things that generate that suffering: the cessation of suffering, *Nibbana*.

But if neither self-indulgence nor self-denial lead to the cessation of suffering, how *does* one get there?

The *fourth noble truth* spells out the Buddha's answer, which is given in the form of what he calls an "eightfold path," that is, a strategy for self-improvement with eight elements, incorporating (1) the *cultivation of insight and wisdom,* (2) *moral virtue*, and (3) *mental discipline* (meditation). (In the translations below, these are called "discernment," "virtue," and "concentration.")

Before I list the elements of the eightfold path, I want to make explicit some of the structural features of the Buddha's doctrine.

First, note that the central notion in the Buddha's philosophical perspective is that of *cause and effect*. Again and again, he analyses things in terms of cause and effect. For instance, the famous concept of *kamma* (in Sanskrit, *karma*) is all about cause and effect: a good cause produces a good effect, a bad cause produces a bad effect.

This is exactly how the four noble truths work: a good cause (the eightfold path) produces a good result (the cessation of suffering, or Nibbana); a bad cause (craving) produces a bad effect (suffering). It could not be more simple. And yet, he was convinced that the doctrine was so radical, that it represented such a challenge to our most basic assumptions about what we should do if we want to be happy, that few people would be willing to accept this idea.

Second, I want to emphasize that the notion of craving is really an abbreviation for a more complex notion: the three "kilesas," or "defilements," that is, mental impurities. There are three of these: greed, hatred and ignorance. They are also known as attachment, aversion (although it would be better to say "avoidance"), and delusion.

The *cognitive defilement* of delusion is more basic than the *emotive defilements* of attachment and avoidance, in the sense that the latter two are rooted in, and made possible by an inability or unwillingness to see things as they really are. (On this see Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Eightfold Path* [BPS].)

To be attached to something is not just to want it; it is to *rely* on it for one's welfare. In the jargon of the Buddhist religion, something that one relies on is called a refuge. Attachment is seeking refuge *in* something; avoidance is seeking refuge *from* something. Both are based on the delusion that the things we are attached to or avoidant towards are *reliable,* either in the affirmative sense that one can rely on them being there for you when you want them, or in the negative sense that you can rely on them *not* being there when you don't want them.

If you are avoidant towards sickness, you are seeking refuge from sickness, which is to say that you are counting on or relying on not getting sick. But you *cannot* rely on that, since health is unreliable. Pinning your hopes on that is seeking refuge from something that we cannot count on avoiding.

What is the nature of the delusion here? It is failing or refusing to see the inconstancy of "conditioned" realities. (In this context, "conditioned" means they come or go depending on circumstances; the "unconditioned" peace of Nibbana does not depend in this way on conditions.)

Inconstancy means both impermanence and unreliability, and suggests that what it describes is bound to disappoint. To the Buddha *all* conditioned things are inconstant, unreliable and unsatisfactory. Attachment and

avoidance are founded upon a blindness to this reality.

So, craving (attachment, avoidance, and delusion) will not lead to the cessation of suffering, but to its multiplication. The path must lead in another direction.

Let's look, then, at the Buddha's path to "Nibbana" [or, in Sanskrit, *Nirvana*]: *the eightfold path*.

As I mentioned above, the eight "factors" or elements fall into three groups. First, there are the factors of the path relating to *discernment*:

1. Right View: understanding the four noble truths.
2. Right Resolve: the commitment to cultivate renunciation, good will and harmlessness.

Second, there are the factors relating to *virtue:*

3. Right Speech: speech that is not false, malicious, harsh, or frivolous.
4. Right Action: not killing, stealing, or engaging in sexual misconduct.
5. Right Livelihood: a non-harming way of earning a living.

Third, there are the factors relating to *concentration:*

6. Right Effort: persistent attempt to encourage skillful traits, and discard unskillful traits.
7. Right Mindfulness: continual awareness of one's body, one's feelings, one's mind, and one's mental formations, "in and of themselves."
8. Right Concentration: the jhanas (absorptions), which are states of deep, "one-pointed" concentration.

Of course, these call for considerable commentary and elucidation, some of which is found in the discourses excerpted below. But I will not pursue that here.

It will suffice to say that, whether one ultimately agrees with him or not, it is difficult to deny that the Buddha's discourses offer us a lucidly articulated, profoundly sophisticated challenge to "commonsense" views about the good life. As such, they deserve to play a prominent role in

any student's attempts to come to terms with the philosophical questions posed by the human condition, especially the question that Socrates regarded as the most fundamental: how should we live?

Stephen D'Arcysdarcy@uwo.ca
Department of Philosophy, Huron University College

Typographical Note:
Words attributed to the Buddha are indicated by double quotation marks ("..."); words attributed to others are indicated by single quotation marks ('....'). Passages not in quotation marks are narrational in character (such as the following: *A certain monk went to his preceptor....*).

Note on books of the Pali Canon excerpted here:
All selections in this compilation are taken from the Nikayas of the Pali Canon, that is, the discourse collections. (The Pali Canon has three parts: the *Nikayas*, the *Vinaya*, which compiles the disciplinary rules for monks and nuns, and the *Abhidhamma*, or "Higher Dhamma," which consists of psychological and philosophical commentaries composed after the Buddha's death.) The sources for the selections are indicated in square brackets at the end of each passage, including a name of the collection and a number identifying the discourse, as follows: [Digha Nikaya, 15]. Of the five Nikayas, four are identified by the collection's name: the Digha Nikaya (*Long Discourses*), the Majjhima Nikaya (*Middle-Length Discourses*), the Samyutta Nikaya (*Connected Discourses*), and the Anguttara Nikaya (*Further-Factored Discourses*). The fifth collection, the Khuddaka Nikaya (*Little Texts*), is ommitted in favour of the name of the more specific "little text": for instance, Udana, Dhammapada, Itivuttaka, Sutta Nipata, Theragatha, Therigatha, and so on.