

Dhivan, Review: Essential Dharma

Review: Essential Dharma - Three New Selections from the Pali Canon Compared **Reviewed by Dhivan Thomas Jones**

Sayings of the Buddha ed. & trans. Rupert Gethin. Oxford University Press 2008. 336 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0192839251, £9.99.

Basic Teachings of the Buddha ed. & trans. Glenn Wallis. Modern Library: New York 2007. 240 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0812975239, £10.99.

Early Buddhist Discourses ed. & trans. John J. Holder. Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis 2006. 240 pages, ISBN-13: 978-0872207929, £9.95.

An anthology of suttas from the Pali Canon, marketed along the lines of ‘authentic teachings of the Buddha’, must be a safe bet for publishers: there are plenty of people interested in Buddhism, and the Pali canon is so unwieldy that an anthology is a genuinely useful introduction to it. No surprise, then, to find three new anthologies of suttas on the market, from big publishers, each aimed at the general reading public. So – is any of these three to be preferred, in terms of introducing readers to selections from the early Buddhist texts?

Let’s first weigh up the books in economic terms appropriate to these difficult days. *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*, by Glenn Wallis, has 57 pages of translation from 16 suttas (plus commentary). *Early Buddhist Discourses*, by John Holder, has 178 pages of translation, of 20 (long) suttas. *Sayings of the Buddha*, by Rupert Gethin, comes out some way ahead, with 245 pages of translation, of 37 suttas. Since the books cost about the same, Gethin’s anthology is easily the best value for money. But let’s not leave it there. 72% of the suttas in Wallis’ anthology are in the other two; 41% of those in Holder’s are found in the others, but only 18% of those in Gethin’s. The economic choice is clear. For those wishing for maximum suttas-per-£, buy Gethin. The better-off might also purchase Holder. Then, if there is a three-for-two offer on, get Wallis.

I venture this comparison only because the results so accurately reflect a more sober critique of the scholarly and religious achievements of the three. But before I share my opinion of why Gethin’s anthology is so greatly to be preferred, let’s consider what might be expected of a good anthology of suttas from the Pali Canon.

One might expect the contents of such an anthology to represent the most literarily attractive and doctrinally representative suttas, arranged in a way that avoids the difficulties of the Canon as a whole; which include the apparent arbitrariness of sequencing of suttas, the sometimes telephone-book-like lack of literary pretension, and the constant mind-numbing repetitions. One might further expect the translations of the selected suttas to be based on good scholarship while also being rendered into clear, contemporary English, and with technical terms and expressions explained where necessary. Lastly, one might expect a commentary for each sutta, explaining its significance and meaning, and relating its contents to other included suttas.

In fact, all three of these new anthologies meet these high expectations. They all limit their choice to the four main *nikāyas*, hence excluding the more heterogeneous contents of the *khuddhaka nikāya* (*Sutta-Nipāta*, *Udāna*, *Dhammapada*, *Thera-* and *Therī-gāthās*, *Jātakas* and so on). By doing so, they concentrate attention on representative doctrinal concerns of the early Buddhists, though in different ways. Each of the translators is an academic trained in the language and thought of early Buddhism, and the translations are both scholarly and readable: long gone are the days of *jhāna* rendered as ‘trance’. Each anthology includes a general introduction to the Pali Canon and early Buddhism, and individual introductions and notes for each sutta. It’s interesting to note the three suttas common to all three anthologies: there is the *Kālāma Sutta*¹ (the Buddha’s advice to the Kālāmas to test out religious teachings in their own experience), the *Cūlamālunkya Sutta*² (in which the Buddha tells Mālunkya that his ten metaphysical questions are irrelevant to the spiritual life) and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*³ (the Buddha’s exposition of mindfulness practice): the conclusion must be that our anthologists all agree that sceptical empiricism, anti-metaphysical pragmatism and mindfulness practise are central concerns of the Buddha’s teaching.

So now for the differences on which I base my preference. Gethin chooses suttas from each of the four *nikāyas*, hoping to reflect something of the overall structure of the Pali Canon (longer and shorter discourses, groups and repetitions), as well as to represent its teachings fairly. He chooses a range of suttas from the more technical (like the *Simile of the Snake*) to the mythic (*King Sudassana*). As one might expect from the President of the Pali Text Society, his Pali scholarship is first rate. He writes (p.xlv) that he corrects a few mistakes made by earlier translators, though in fact none of these corrections are very major; his notes also include a good deal of philological

detail. More noticeable is his natural and readable English. He makes a point of avoiding what P.J. Griffiths has termed ‘Buddhist Hybrid English’ (an in-joke, playing on the expression ‘Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit’ used to describe the language of the early Mahāyāna Sūtras).

In fact, each of these translators is wary of Buddhist Hybrid English (BHE). For instance, none of them translates *kusala* as ‘skilled’ or ‘skilful’, an example of BHE in that ‘skill’ is not a word we naturally use in English in relation to ethics; instead they render it ‘wholesome’ or ‘good’. Gethin is particularly thorough, though he leaves words like *nibbāna* and *tathāgata* (which means ‘one like this’ or ‘one who has reached this state’) untranslated, which lets him off the hook. To move on to Holder’s anthology, there is one example of BHE that does stand out: he translates *sugata* as ‘Well-Farer’, which I think was one of Mrs Rhys Davids’ picturesque coinages (Gethin translates it ‘the happy one’).

Holder has a more particular purpose than Gethin: he offers the reader a selection that specifically covers the major philosophical themes found in the Canon. Instead of the long *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (which occupies 60 pages of Gethin’s book), Holder has the *Mahānidāna*, the *Madhupiṇḍika* and the *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Suttas* which all concern various aspects of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent arising). Holder thus usefully directs his anthology towards the student of the Buddha’s philosophical ideas, and offers clear and concise commentary on these ideas, though with fewer references to the wider scholarly literature than Gethin includes.

Glenn Wallis’ selection aims to be neither representative nor specifically philosophical. His anthology includes proportionally the most commentary, and its purpose is to introduce the reader not simply to some suttas but to what they might mean for the individual spiritual aspirant. That is, he attempts to translate from Pali into a contemporary cultural message; hence the selection of merely sixteen (some very short) suttas, chosen to illustrate his own exposition of Buddhism. This exposition is an aggressively secularised one that emphasizes ‘present-moment awareness’ (*sati*). Particularly striking is Wallis’ individualism: he writes that he ‘resisted the powerful temptation to consult the commentarial traditions of the great Buddhist schools’ (p.xliv), meaning, one supposes, that he has interpreted the texts in his own way. Wallis’ idea of Buddhist ethics is reductive and psychological; he avoids translating *sīla* as ‘virtue’ or ‘morality’ because ‘these English words not only ring too, well, virtuous and moralistic, but also miss the

point... What matters is not the virtue inherent in our actions but the soundness of them in relation to overcoming persistent unease [*dukkha*]' (p.117).

His translations are in good clear English, but slip into BHE at crucial points. Following Thanissaro Bhikkhu he renders *nibbāna* as 'unbinding'. Whatever the merits of Thanissaro's thinking, however, 'unbinding' means little to me in English. When I come across Thanissaro's use of this word in his translations on the Access to Insight website,⁴ I have to mentally remind myself that he means *nibbāna*. Wallis departs from any precedent, however, in his translation of *ariyasacca* as 'pre-eminent reality'. He claims that 'the use of the term "noble truth" is historically and doctrinally irresponsible' (p.122). He cites K.R. Norman's article on 'The Four Noble Truths',⁵ which speculates that the term *ariyasacca* may have been a later insertion into the formula *dukkha samudaya nirodha magga* (pain, origin, cessation, path) because of its strange grammatical appearance in the *Dhammacakkhapavattana Sutta*. But both K.R. Norman and Gethin, who cites the same article (p.290), in fact continue to translate *ariyasacca* as 'noble truth'. He also claims (p.123) that the Buddha may have been using the word *ariya* in an ironic or inverted sense, since it was a word used by the Brahmans to refer to their own superior status. However, *ariya* (Sanskrit *ārya*) was used by members of all three higher *varṇas* (castes) to refer to themselves as Sanskrit-speakers who performed Vedic rituals. Wallis thus leaves us without a real explanation of why 'noble truth' is such a reprehensible translation. I leave readers to guess what he means by 'pre-eminent eight-component course'.

Despite my reservations and criticisms, however, Wallis' choice of suttas is exciting to read; and his commentary for all my disapproval is lively and bold. Holder's anthology is less exciting, though more useful for learning about the Buddha's brilliant philosophical insights. Nevertheless, for anyone who wants to get a reliable overview of the Pali Canon, Gethin's book is better than either. And did I say it has more suttas in it than the other two combined?

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¹ *Anguttara Nikāya* 3:65, PTS 1.188–93.

² *Majjhima Nikāya* 63, PTS 1.426–32.

³ *Dīgha Nikāya* 22, PTS 2.290–315 and *Majjhima Nikāya* 10, PTS 1.55–63.

⁴ www.accesstoinsight.org [Accessed: 25.01.2009].

⁵ *Collected Papers vol.2*, PTS 1991, pp.210–23.