

The Buddhist Texts

The Dhammapada (The path of the Dhamma)

(Note: Dhamma is Pali; Dharma is Sanskrit)

The Dhammapada is an anthology, belonging to the part of the Theravada Pali Canon of scriptures known as the Khudda Nikaya, and consists 423 verses in Pali uttered by the Buddha on some 305 occasions for the benefit of a wide range of human beings.

These sayings were selected and compiled into one book as being worthy of special note on account of their beauty and relevance for molding the lives of future generations of Buddhists. They are divided into 26 chapters and the stanzas are arranged according to subject matter.

The 26 chapters are:

1. The Pairs (verses 1-20)
2. Heedfulness (verses 21-32)
3. The Mind (verses 33-43)
4. Flowers (verses 44-59)
5. The Fool (verses 60-75)
6. The Wise Man (verses 76-89)
7. The Perfected One (verses 90-99)
8. The Thousands (verses 100-115)
9. Evil (verses 116-128)
10. Violence (verses 129-145)
11. Old Age (verses 146-156)
12. The Self (verses 157-166)
13. The World (verses 167-178)
14. The Buddha (verses 179-196)
15. Happiness (verses 197-208)
16. Affection (verses 209-220)
17. Anger (verses 221-234)
18. Impurity (verses 235-255)
19. The Just (verses 256-272)
20. The Path (verses 273-289)
21. Miscellaneous (verses 290-305)
22. The State of Woe (verses 306-319)
23. The Elephant (verses 320-333)
24. Craving (verses 334-359)
25. The Monk (verses 360-382)
26. The Holy Man (verses 383-423)

Like most anthologies of verses, the Dhammapada is very uneven. Some verses are both profound and deeply poetic. Others are awkward and little more than a list of technical terms. The overall effect of the Dhammapada however is undoubtedly of high moral and spiritual earnestness, and a typically Buddhist gentle persuasiveness.

Full text of the Dhammapada is at <http://www.serve.com/cmtan/Dhammapada/>

The Tipitaka (The Three Baskets)

The Teachings of the Buddha, known also as the Dhamma, were collated into three separate sets of books. These books are collectively known as the Tipitaka, or the Three Baskets. Approximately 25% of the Dhammapada is included in the Tipitaka. The total amount of material is vast and is estimated to be more than twice that of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Although some changes and distortions in the Tipitaka are inevitable due to the 2,500 years or so it has been in existence, it is estimated that up to 90% of the Teachings remain unaltered. This is because when it was recited, it was done so with several hundred monks reciting in unison. When it was finally committed to writing in around 80 BC, large groups of monks also undertook this task in unison. This made changing or altering the Tipitaka very difficult. The original texts survive today and are well preserved in Sri Lanka.

The Sutta Pitaka

Itself subdivided into five separate collections, the Sutta Pitaka, contains all of the Buddha's discourses as well as several from his most senior disciples. The Buddha was extremely successful in his Teachings as he used the language of the common people, which is called Pali.

He adapted the manner and style of His discourses such that he used simpler concepts for the ordinary folk, and more complex ideas for educated and intellectual audiences. He taught everyone from peasants to kings.

The Teachings range from guidelines for individual behavior to highly sophisticated commentaries on politics and social philosophy. They are pragmatic and readily applicable to daily life. And despite being taught more than 2,500 years ago, His Teachings are still very much pertinent today.

The Vinaya Pitaka

Also divided into five books, the Vinaya Pitaka lays down the rules and guidelines for the Sangha or the community of monks. With every single monk having equal rights, it is possibly one of the earliest known forms of democratic governance in history.

The Abhidhamma Pitaka

Known as the Higher Teachings of the Buddha, the Abhidhamma Pitaka is a monumental and extremely complex and sophisticated piece of work. It contains the Buddhist doctrines arranged and classified in a highly systematic set of seven books.

Although traditionally attributed to the Buddha himself, many commentators now regard the Abhidhamma as the work of scholar monks who distilled the Teachings of the Buddha into this amazing document.

It deals with the concepts of existence and reality. It analyzes the human thought processes and examines the constituents of mind and matter. Many of its concepts relating to reality and perception have anticipated the works of modern thinkers and scientists.