

What a Buddhist must know

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Abstract

The Pali Canon are the Buddha's teachings, and Doctrine as the Buddha clearly stated that the Dhamma and Vinaya were to succeed him as Teacher after his passing, it follows that the Pali Canon is in effect where Buddhists can still have an audience with their Teacher and learn his Teaching even though he passed away over 2,500 years ago. The rehearsal, whose purpose was to collect and organize the word of the Buddha, did not take place until three months after his demise. As it was conducted by an assembly of 500 Arahant elders, this event also gave rise to what is now known as Theravada Buddhism. During the rehearsal, once any given portion of the teachings was agreed upon, it was chanted in unison by the assembly. The text chanted was thereby formally endorsed as the model to be committed word for word to memory and to be passed on to others and handed down to posterity.

The teachings thus orally transmitted were first written down during the Fourth Rehearsal, conducted in Sri Lanka around B.E.460. The Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism, after two and a half millennia and six major rehearsal, has been generally recognized as the oldest, most original, most complete, and most accurate record of the Buddha's teachings still available today. The Pali Canon provides the standards or criteria for judging whether a given teaching or way of practice truly belongs to Buddhism, It is thus the duty and responsibility of all Buddhists to preserve and protect the Pali Canon, which is crucial for the survival of Buddhism, and hence also for the welfare and happiness of the world.

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Background

The quintessence of Buddhism

Generally speaking, the term Buddhāsāṇa 'Buddhism' has a very broad semantic coverage,

embracing everything ranging from the teachings, the Order of monks, organisations, institutions and religious affairs, down to religious places and objects. However, if we delve deeply into its real signification, this term refers to 'the Teaching of the Buddha', as suggested by its literal meaning itself. This indeed constitutes the quintessence of Buddhism, anything other than this being merely its extension or offshoot. Once this true meaning is grasped, it can be seen that the survival of Buddhism means in effect the existence of the Buddha's teachings. Should his teachings fade away, no matter how many individuals, religious

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affairs, and huge religious places and objects there might be, Buddhism cannot be said to exist any more. Conversely, even if the foregoing external concrete things should be lost, but if the teachings survive, Buddhism can still become known. For this reason, the true preservation of Buddhism all boils down to maintaining the Buddha's teachings. To be more specific, the teachings of the Buddha refer to the word of the Buddha or what the Buddha said (Buddhavacana). Essentially, then, to maintain Buddhism is to preserve the word of the Buddha.

By the word of the Buddha are meant the Doctrine (Dhamma) and Discipline (Vinaya) set forth and laid down by him. Not long before his Final Nibbana, the Buddha himself said that not any one monk was to be appointed his successor as Teacher after his passing. Instead, he had it made known to all Buddhists that the Doctrine and Discipline would take his place.

The Pali Canon to preliminary information

The scripture enshrining the word of the Buddha the Dhamma and Vinaya is generally known to the Westerner as the Pali Canon, or Buddhist Canon because it contains the fundamental principle of a religion, Buddhism in this case, and the text of this canon is recorded in the Pali language. The Pali term for the Pali Canon, however, is Tipitaka, from ti 'three' + pitaka 'text, scripture, or basket, which literally designates its three major divisions of teachings: The Vinayapitaka is the collection of monastic rules laid down by the Buddha for monks and nuns.

The Suttantapitaka is the collection of discourses, or specific teachings that were

adaptively expounded by the Buddha to suit the individual, place, and event or situation in question, together with supplemental material. The Abhidhammapitaka is the collection of the teachings that are purely substantive or academic, without reference to any individuals or events, and without any supplemental material.

As a matter of fact, the Pali Canon is not a single-volume scripture, but an enormous set of scriptures containing as many as 84,000 textual units. The version in Thai script is conventionally printed in 45 volumes, signifying the 45 years of the Buddha's ministry, with as many as 22,379 pages or approximately 24,300,000 letters. Each pitaka is classified into sections and further classified into a complex of subsections.

The significance of the Pali Canon

The significance of the Pali Canon in the maintenance of the Teaching can be appreciated more when the Pali Canon is seen in relation to other components of Buddhism.

1. The Pali Canon and the Triple Gem

The principal reason for the paramount importance of the Pali Canon is that it is where the Triple Gem, also the Three Refuges for all Buddhists, is preserved:

(1) The Pali Canon is the dwelling place of the Buddha. As mentioned earlier, the Dhamma and Vinaya are our Teacher on the Buddha's behalf after his Final Nibbana. From this perspective, we Buddhists can still have an audience with the Teacher in the Pali Canon even though he passed away over 2,500 years ago.

(2) The Pali Canon performs the duty of the Dhamma. It is through the Pali Canon that we can get to know the Dhamma and Vinaya, the Dhamma and Vinaya are simply abbreviated as the Dhamma. When we need something to symbolise it, it is the Tipitaka that is often used.

(3) The Pali Canon is where the Sangha is accommodated. The Sangha owes its existence to the rules laid down by the Buddha in the Tipitaka. In other words, Buddhist monks that form the Sangha can be ordained and remain in their monkhood only because of the Vinaya.

The Vinayapitaka contains the rules and regulations for the maintenance of the Sangha. Conversely, the Sangha is entrusted with the duty to preserve and keep alive the Teaching. The Sangha is thus closely attached to the Tipitaka. Overall, the Triple Gem has to rely on the Pali Canon to manifest itself to the populace of the world, starting with the Buddhists themselves. The Pali Canon is therefore important as the vehicle through which the Triple Gem becomes known. Preserving the Pali Canon is in effect maintaining the Triple Gem, which is also maintaining Buddhism itself.

2. The Pali Canon and the Four Assemblies

The Buddha once said he would enter the final Nibbana only when all the Four Assemblies, namely monks and nuns whether they were elders, middling or newly ordained ones together with laymen and laywomen celibate and married alike were endowed with the qualities of worthy custodians of the Teaching, as follows:

(1) They must be well-versed in the teachings of the Buddha and have proper conduct in accordance with the teachings;

(2) They must be able to teach others, having learnt the teachings and conducted themselves well;

(3) They must be able to confute false doctrines, or teachings that are distorted or different from the original Doctrine and Discipline, when such teachings arise.

Not long before the Buddha's demise, Mara the Evil One approached him and pointed out that the Four Assemblies were already endowed with the desired qualities mentioned above—which was as if the precondition the Buddha had earlier set for his own Final Nibbana. When the Buddha saw that that was indeed the case, he immediately agreed to take the Final Nibbana and therefore relinquished his will to live on. This saying of the Buddha in effect entrusted the Teaching to the Four Assemblies. But care must also be taken as to what type of Buddhist is worthy of this task.

Buddhists can qualify as worthy custodians of the Teaching only when there is a scripture from which to learn and understand the authentic Doctrine and Discipline in the first place. So in this sense, the Pali Canon is the guiding principle for the Four Assemblies and must exist alongside them, providing the basis for their becoming worthy custodians of the Teaching.

These two sides preservers of the Teaching and the Teaching to be preserved are mutually dependent. In order for the Teaching to survive and bear fruit, it is the Four Assemblies in whom the Teaching becomes manifested and by

whom it is preserved. At the same time, in order for the Four Assemblies to become as such and benefit from the Teaching, it is the Doctrine and Discipline preserved in the Pali Canon that serve as their guiding principles.

3. The Pali Canon and the three true doctrines

From another perspective, what Buddhism is all about can be summarised in three words: Pariyatti, Patipatti, and Pativedha, or the three true doctrines. Which Pariyatti refers to the word of the Buddha that we study, through the Pali Canon, without which the Buddha's teachings could never reach us. We can say that the Pariyatti is the result of the Pativedha and is also the basis for the practice (Patipatti) of Buddhism.

After achieving the result of his own practice, the Buddha proclaimed the Teaching, based on his own experiences. The word of the Buddha thus became our Pariyatti, when we regard the Pariyatti as the result of the Pativedha, we exclusively refer to the Pativedha of the Buddha, i.e. the result of his own practice and the result of the practice accepted by the Buddha, but not that of any yogi, hermit, ascetic, recluse, anchorite, preacher, cult leader, or founder of another religion.

Without learning the Pariyatti or what the Buddha taught, our practice would be misguided, mistaken, and deviant from the original Teaching. If our practice was wrong, whatever result we achieved could not be correct. And if we deceived ourselves with our own findings that were erroneously taken to be true, there could be no way for the Pativedha to ensue.

Hence, without the Pariyatti as basis, the Pañipatti and the Pañivedha would also fail to materialise. All would collapse together. To put it simply, from the Buddha's own Pañivedha came our Pariyatti, which we learn and which provides the basis for our practice (Pañipatti). When we practise properly, we will achieve the Pañivedha just as the Buddha did. As long as this cycle still goes on, the Buddha's Teaching will survive. The Pariyatti that was derived from the Buddha's Pativedha and provides the basis for all Buddhists to practice is to be found in the Pali Canon.

From this perspective, then, if we are to preserve the Pariyatti, Pañipatti and Pañivedha, we will have to preserve the Pali Canon. Whether we trichotomise the Teaching into Pariyattisaddhamma, Pañipatti-saddhamma, and Pañivedha-saddhamma, or sometimes dichotomise it into Pariyattisasana and Patipatti-sasana, it all boils down to the Pali Canon as the basis. Thus if we can preserve the Canon, so can we preserve Buddhism.

4. The Pali Canon and the Threefold Training

On a more profound level, it is possible to develop Buddhism into part and parcel of oneself, or incorporate it into the life of each person. Essentially, Buddhism can be seen as the resultant virtue, progress or growth, or the development of the Threefold Training in one's life.

The sort of Buddhism that constitutes one's life also has to rely on the Pali Canon, for Buddhism in this sense means the ability to get rid of greed, hatred and delusion, and to be able to get rid of greed, hatred and delusion, one has to train oneself in morality, concentration and wisdom. In

organising the teachings into the Tipitaka, tradition has established a relationship between each of the three major divisions of the Pali Canon with each component of the Threefold Training as follows:

4.1 The Vinayapitaka as the collection of monastic rules for monks, including both the 227 training rules of the Patimokkha and those outside of the Patimokkha, constitutes the Discipline or *sila* morality the training and development of bodily and verbal behavior.

4.2 As a matter of fact, the Suttantapitaka encompasses all of the Threefold Training, but it has been pointed out that its main focus is on the second component of the Threefold Training, i.e. *saṃādhi* ‘concentration’, or emotional development.

4.3 Finally, the focus of the Abhidhammapitaka is on *paññā* ‘wisdom’. In contemporary parlance, the contents of this *piṭaka* are purely scholarly or academic, bringing up for scrutiny phenomena that are subtle and profound. It thus belongs to the domain of wisdom, requiring profound penetrative knowledge.

Which observe the principles of morality, concentration and wisdom as expounded in the Pali Canon, our lives will become like the teaching itself, thereby as if preserving Buddhism with our own lives. As long as we live, so will Buddhism survive. Wherever we are, there will be Buddhism. Whichever place we visit, Buddhism will reach there as well. This is called Buddhism existing at the consummate level of preservation. Once the Pali Canon has been incorporated into a person’s life, it does not merely exist in letter.

However, before Buddhism can be incorporated into individuals, the Pali Canon must first be there to contain and maintain the Teaching. Even when our practice progresses, we need to consult the monks who have learnt from the Tipitaka, or from the ones who have learnt from their predecessors who in turn have learnt from the Tipitaka. The teachings may have been passed down dozens of generations like this to us. If we can read Pali, we can consult the Pali Canon ourselves. If we cannot, we have to ask the learned monks for help. After we have obtained the required knowledge about the teachings, we can then practice properly to cultivate ourselves in morality, concentration, and wisdom.

Which Buddhists rely directly upon the Pali Canon by applying the teachings therein so that our practice will bear fruit in real life.

Conclusion

To recapitulate what was discussed earlier, the importance of the Pali Canon can be summarised as follows:

1. The Pali Canon is the collection of the words of the Buddha. All of what the Buddha himself said that has been handed down to us comes in the Pali Canon. It is through the Pali Canon that we have come to know the Buddha’s teachings.
2. The Pali Canon is where the Teacher of all Buddhists resides, as the Doctrine and Discipline, which the Buddha said would be his successor after his Final Nibbana, are enshrined in it. We can have an audience with, or get to know, the Buddha through his words preserved in the Pali Canon.

3. The Pali Canon is the original source of the Buddha's teachings. Any teachings, explanations, scriptures, books, or textbooks, whether orally provided or compiled by teachers and scholars, that are regarded as Buddhist must of necessity be derived from and in compliance with the principal tenets in the Pali Canon, which are the basis or original source.

4. The Pali Canon is the reference in expounding or confirming the principles claimed to be Buddhist. Any explanations or claims about the tenets of Buddhism will be reliable or well accepted only when referring to evidence found in the Pali Canon, which is regarded as the ultimate reference, with the final say.

5. The Pali Canon provides the standards against which Buddhist teachings are to be judged. Any teachings or sayings claimed to be Buddhist teachings must be in compliance with the Doctrine and Discipline that come in the Pali Canon.

6. The Pali Canon provides the standards against which beliefs and ways of practice in Buddhism can be checked. It is by the Doctrine and Discipline found in the Pali Canon that we can judge whether certain beliefs or ways of practice, as well as any behaviour, are right or wrong, whether they really belong to the Buddha's teachings.

For these reasons, the study of the Pali Canon is a task of crucial importance for Buddhists. It is regarded as the maintenance or survival of Buddhism. In other words, as long as the Pali Canon is studied as the guiding principle for practice, Buddhism will survive. Otherwise, whatever practice one might have would not be in accordance with the

tenets of Buddhism, and the Teaching itself would die out.

Apart from the importance it directly bears on Buddhism, the Pali Canon is valuable in many respects, particularly the following:

(1) The Pali Canon is a huge record of cults, creeds, religions, philosophies, customs, traditions, cultures, affairs, events, and localities, such as the various city states, in the past.

(2) The Pali Canon is the source of concepts related to various fields of study, as the teachings in the Doctrine and Discipline are related to, or inclusive of, many different disciplines such as psychology, law, governance, and economics, to name a few.

(3) It is the original source of Pali words used in the Thai language. As the Pali language is an important basis for the Thai language, the study of the Pali Canon are especially helpful to the study of Thai.

Overall, studies and researches in the Pali Canon are not only of tremendous value to the study of Buddhism, but also of great benefit to a broad spectrum of disciplines including the Thai language, geography, but anthropology, archaeology, political science, economics, law, education, religion, philosophy, psychology, etc. However, it is rather surprising and disheartening that people nowadays do not seem to understand what the Pali Canon is, why it should be preserved and protected, why it should be employed as the standards or criteria for judging what constitutes the Dhamma and Vinaya, or in other words what constitutes the Buddha's teachings. Without such basic understanding, some might go so far as to assume wrongly that the

Buddha’s teachings can be just anything anyone likes.

Furthermore, there is confusion between the objective principles of the religion and the subjective opinions of individuals. This confusion, perhaps not unrelated to the first problem, is bound to lead to a lot of problems. If we ask what the Buddha taught, or what he taught about a particular subject, we have to turn to the Pali Canon for the answer, for there is no other source that can answer this question. But if we are asked, given what the Buddha taught, what we think about it, then we are entitled to what we think; it is our freedom of expression to comment on what the Buddha taught.

Even in the latter case, to do justice to the Teacher, we should first study the explanations in the scriptures until we understand them clearly before making a summary of our study. If it is properly summarised, then the summary will be in accord with what the Buddha taught. Otherwise, it would be faulty, in which case further study is called for. But at least we have to draw a distinction, as pointed out above, between what the Buddha taught—which should be faithfully presented—and what we ourselves think about it which we are free to express. Unfortunately, this distinction has now often been blurred, with a great deal of confusion going around.

As a matter of fact, the main tenets of Buddhism are quite distinct and definitive, and not merely a matter of opinion or conjecture. They are firmly based on the evidence regarded by Buddhists to have directly come down from the Buddha, in the form of the Tipitaka, with the commentaries, among other scriptures, providing supplemental

explanations. Recognised by Buddhists throughout the ages to constitute the Teaching proper, to be the most authoritative references, these scriptures have been painstakingly preserved in their original state as accurately as possible—by means of memorisation and study, with rehearsals conducted as large-scale projects in different periods all along.

Whoever claims that he can practice without recourse to the Tipitaka in effect says that he can practice without recourse to the Buddha. Since he practices without recourse to the word of the Buddha, how can we call his practice Buddhist? Of course, it is simply practice in accordance with a cult, creed or opinion of his own, or of somebody else who has either conjured up his own way of practice, or at best based his view on something derived by word of mouth from the Tipitaka, which naturally runs the risk of deviation or distortion. So that, all Buddhists should keep a watchful eye on these two types of individual

(1) Those who confuse the actual word of the Buddha with their personal opinions on the pretext of so-called ‘academic freedom’ and under the guise of ‘academic research’, and

(2) Those who claim that they can practice without recourse to the Buddha. These two types of individual, who it is not uncommon to find in our present society, can indeed cause serious damage to the Teaching in the long run, especially when they have garnered a great number of gullible followers.

They should therefore be alerted to the threat and join forces to tackle it by promoting proper practice based on the true teachings, which we must help preserve in the pristine state. In fact,

it is high time for Buddhists to be rehabilitated, as long as the Pali Canon exists, so will Buddhism the original, authentic Buddhism. Hence, as long as the Pali Canon is there, they still have a chance to get to know Buddhism and derive the genuine benefits that are available from this noble religion.

The Pali Tipitaka will become the vehicle, like a Buddhist missionary who travels far and wide,

for expounding the Dhamma, which is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle, and beautiful in the end, in accordance with the Buddha's instruction for the first batch of his disciples to proclaim the Teaching so as to attain the goal of expanding the welfare and happiness of the multitude to cover the entire populace of the world to continuous.

Reference

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