

THE BUDDHIST SUTTA¹

John Ireland

The Pali scriptures were established more or less in the form we know them today in the first century B.C. when they were committed to writing in Ceylon. Before then they were carried about as an oral tradition in the minds of the Buddha's followers. It is obvious that it would be easy for extraneous matter to intrude and be passed off as sayings of the Buddha. Therefore, to safeguard the tradition any doubtful sayings had to be carefully examined and compared with the accepted *sutta* (discourse) and *vinaya* (rule of conduct). If they did not conflict, they were retained, but if they did, they were rejected.

In the *Nettipakarana* there is a threefold definition of a *sutta*² which may be useful to consider and may help one to think more deeply about these sayings.

The three are:

1. A *sutta* 'must conform' (to the Truths), or, 'must give access' (to the four stages of sanctitude).
2. A *sutta* 'must point the way' (of overcoming the three unhealthy roots).
3. A *sutta* 'must have the nature of Dhamma'.

Firstly it must conform to or lead towards an understanding of, the four Noble Truths: Suffering, its origin in craving, its cessation or Nibbāna and the eightfold path leading to its cessation. The Buddha claimed not to teach anything not connected with these four Truths, and if we are presented with an idea that runs contrary to them it may be rejected. The stages of sanctitude, Stream-entry, Once-returning, Never-returning and *Arahatta*, arise upon successively deeper realisations of these four Noble Truths. They are essential attainments in the practice of Buddhism, so it must give 'access' to them.

Next a *sutta* must guide one who practises what it advises, whether directly or by implication, towards the getting rid of greed, hate and delusion and towards the development of their opposites. For, "whatever leads to dispassion and not to attachment; to release from bondage and not to bondage; to dispersion of defilements and not to accumulating

¹ First published in *Sangha* (Hampstead Buddhist Vihāra, London), Vol. 8, No. 11 (November 1964).

² See *The Guide* (PTS) by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, p.37.

them this, you may affirm is the Dhamma, this is the Teacher's message". (*Anguttara-nikāya* VIII 53.) In addition it should be remembered that the cessation of greed, hate and delusion is a definition of Nibbāna.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, a saying claimed to be that of the Buddha's must be *Dhammata*, which might roughly be said to mean, "having the flavour of Dhamma about it." Dhamma referring here to the Buddha's theory of causation, the Law of Dependent Arising (*paticca-samuppāda*), summarised in the formula:

'This being, that is; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that is not; from the cessation of this, that ceases.'

Therefore it must be adaptable, to and not conflict with, the idea of the conditioned nature of phenomena, their impermanence and unsatisfactoriness; as well as the doctrines of impersonality (*anatta*) and emptiness (*suññata*) which are characteristics also of the unconditioned Nibbāna.

The Buddha's theory of causation pervades all his utterances. He analyses situations and exposes the causes and conditions that give rise to them. He probes behind the questions he is asked, seeing clearly the motives behind them and the implications they give rise to. He lives this Dhamma, has become this Dhamma and never deviates from it. Moreover it is the method (or Dhamma) he uses in teaching his followers: "You, bhikkhus, have been trained by me to look for conditions (*paccaya*) now here, now there, in these things and those," (*Majjhima-nikāya*, 109).

The interesting point in this threefold definition is not that a saying is actually and historically proven as being that of the Buddha's which would be impossible to prove, but that the elders who formulated this definition were well aware of the spirit of the teaching. They knew that, 'whatever is well-spoken is an utterance of the Buddha.'