

BOOK REVIEWS

The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications 2012. 1944pp., £46.80/\$75.00. ISBN -13: 9781614290407.

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Bhikkhu Bodhi's new translation of the whole of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (the 'increasing-by-a-factor' collection), the fourth *Nikāya* of the Pāli Canon, offers a magnificent contribution to add to an already distinguished life's work. It promises to become an indispensable resource to anyone working on or interested in early Buddhist texts. Demonstrating the methodical, systematic categorization and attention to detail that is a hallmark of all his work, he sorts through this most far-ranging, comprehensive and occasionally even idiosyncratic collection with thoroughness and care. He provides us with numbered translations, both accurate and eloquent, coupled with a 58-page introduction that provides an intelligent and thoughtful overview of the collection's distinctive features in relationship to the other *Nikāyas*. This is the first time the translation of the full *Nikāya* has been attempted since the five-volume *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, translated by F.L. Woodward and E.M. Hare (PTS, 1932–1936).

Bodhi's previous achievement in bringing to press translations of two of the four *Nikāyas* in Pāli is already impressive: his through edition and revision of the handwritten translation of *Majjhima-nikāya*, by Venerable Ñāṇamoli (1905–60), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (1995) is really a co-written volume, compiled after Ñāṇamoli's death: he made extensive revisions to the original translations in consultation with other scholars, and wrote the extremely helpful introduction that summarizes some key attributes of the collection as a whole. His translation of the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the two-volume *Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (2000) perhaps represents the *Nikāya* most suited to his analytical skills, which seem tailor-made to address the needs of this particular collection. The 'connected' nature of the *suttas* in the *Samyutta-nikāya* rests upon the way texts are grouped together according to topics, with *suttas* often playing upon repetitions and weaving in new ways elements derived from the one before, or picked up from the one before that. Tabulating the patterns of repetitive but often crucially distinctive threads is a painstaking and difficult task, and Bodhi's extensive tables and a concisely expressed overview in his introduction elucidates and make comprehensible the variations in this particular *suttanta* method. His

introductions to these translations, and this new volume, are essential reading for anyone interested in the distinctive qualities of each of the *Nikāyas*.

So what does he make of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, a diffuse yet organically connected collection of texts, some of which are often not found elsewhere in the canon in any form, whose scope encompasses, in an apparently haphazard manner, such far-ranging themes as cosmology, an emphasis on personal meditation practice that is largely absent in other *Nikāyas*, monastic injunctions, groupings of lay practices, the attributes of friends, and *dhamma* lists, all presented in sometimes unusual and sometimes directly applicable ways? Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests to the reader that the volume, of 1924 pages of text, is read three times. This is a time-honoured and worthy principle, but one wonders how many people will actually do this, or indeed find that this is the best way to get what the collection has to offer: others may dispute this! For this reviewer, such works are not always accessed most easily in this way, but are rather resources, which one can dip into from time to time or read when a series of *suttas* particularly appeal. So, based on a premise that the best way to review a book of this enormity is simply to use it, and see how it works in practice, this review does not attempt a systematic analysis of all use of terms, and each section as a whole, but rather assesses it as a volume that has sat on the desk and been used, pretty constantly, for over a year. After some consideration of the introduction, the review, as a way of communicating the nature of the text, focuses on isolated texts from each one of the books of a collection modelled on the Ṛg Vedic pattern of ones, twos, threes etc, to see how the translation works in specific instances.

Bodhi's introduction develops a theme examined by his other works, of placing the preoccupations and underlying subject matter of the collection in the context of other *Nikāyas*. It is a particular strength of his introductions to attempt this undertaking and I am not aware of any other scholar who has really explored this fascinating subject comprehensively. As he points out, this is not such an easy task for the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which, compared to other *Nikāyas*, is rather more a compendium of widely disparate texts. He has however developed a broad thematic analysis, providing headings according to themes that help to see the texts in some sort of 'meaningful pattern' (p. 23). What Bodhi asserts is probably an ultimately impossible exercise is, however, a useful one, and he sorts through texts, and briefly addresses topics: whether texts are addressed to laypeople or monastics, whether they focus on meditation advice, whether they address soteriological goals and whether, in a trait peculiar to this collection, they focus on types and temperaments of people. Important resonances between the *Nikāyas* are also discussed: as Bodhi notes, the 'ideal spiritual figure' of all is the *Arahat*, and the path is geared around this goal. Specific notions of the nature of rebirth, such as it not being instantaneous (p. 70), are also particular to the *Nikāyas* as a whole, and often contrast with commentarial interpretations. The introduction is excellent; one wishes that this commentator, in a remarkable position to provide us with such an overview, had explored some issues, such as the particularity of meditation advice one finds in A, even more. The chapter concludes with some very welcome discussion of commentaries to this collection, and some welcome and detailed Chinese parallels.

Going through the collection, and seeing how Bodhi translates specific texts, one is not disappointed. 'The Book of the Ones' is perhaps the most mysteriously

interesting section of this *Nikāya* and gives us some of the most cited and unusual texts in the entire canon: apparently focusing on singularity, it gives us rather a richly profuse account of meditational and personal variety, with ‘ones’ including not only the vast range of possible meditation objects and approaches, in what is in effect the only extensive canonical list on the subject (A I 30ff), but also a eulogy to the various excellences of individuals in all four assemblies, monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen (A I 24–26). This of course offers a crucially important validation both of diversity in practice and the possibility of the long-term continuation of Buddhist teaching. Bodhi provides throughout carefully thought out translations and explanatory footnotes, directing the reader to further information on each of the followers involved, for instance. His translations are lucid and well spaced on the page. He translates *pabhassara citta* as ‘the luminous mind’, a choice that reads well in the repeated formula ‘Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind ...’ (A I 10). ‘The Twos’ as a category invites a sense of polarity and contrast: between ‘bad’ and ‘good’, and ‘higher’ and ‘lower’. Bodhi seems right in retaining the ethical dimension to such terms where appropriate. Other polarities include mother and father, and serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*); the texts are very short and antithetical, and the translations are well presented and numbered so that they can be read individually, as well as in sequence. ‘The Threes’ starts to diversify elements in lists. There are some that are expected, such as the three roots, or body, speech and mind, but also some are more creative and metaphoric, such as the three preliminary tasks of a farmer: to plough and harrow a field, to sow at the right time, and to irrigate and drain. These are compared to training behaviour, training the mind, and the practice of wisdom (A I 230). ‘The Fours’ includes categories we have come to expect of Indian lists, with the fourth transcending the other three: so we have variations on the types of practitioner, culminating in the one who has ‘crossed over and gone beyond’ (A II 5–6) or those practising the four *jhānas*, or the four divine abidings. Bodhi chooses the term ‘altruistic joy’ for *muditā*. Often the fourth element is explicitly stated as the higher, as in the lights, radiances, and lustres, in which wisdom is the best in each case (A II 139–40). In this book we are also moving into an area in which the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* excels: types of monastic and lay behaviour, as well as the cosmological, with categories of miraculous displays and environmental phenomena: the list of marvels at the arising of a universal monarch (A II 133) or the four times a great radiance occurs in the life of a Buddha (A II 130–31), for instance. Advice about meditation, through the changes and rhythms of daily practice, is also included: the four times to practise serenity, insight, have *Dhamma* discussion or listen to *Dhamma*, for instance (A II 140), and different kinds of path and practice (A II 92, 157). These are some of the only places in the canon where this kind of personal and practical observation is included. Interspersed with these there are even such intriguing texts as a short summary of four kinds of poet, which would reward much more investigation (A II 231)! The Pāli for these, as so often with the rich and fertile vocabulary of this collection, is well explained by Bodhi (note 940, p. 1719). This sense of both personal idiosyncrasy and individual practice continues with ‘The Fives’, which includes different benefits of breathing mindfulness (A III 120–21), kinds of questions that a practitioner may ask (A III 191–92) and various kinds of warnings about the disadvantages of wrong behaviour (A III 266–67). Bodhi’s translations are consistently well explained. A more complex examina-

tion of practice, with lists of warnings and tips, as well as a continued preoccupation with cosmology, continues into 'The Sixes', where narrative and dialogue starts to assume greater importance; *suttas* more frequently follow the classic *suttanta* style of a practitioner asking a specific question in a certain time and place (A III 356–57; A III 374–421). This emphasis takes on a far greater role up to the end of the collection. Particularly notable in 'The Sevens', is the text on the seven life-stages of the coral tree (*pāricchattaka*) in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, a wonderful oddity that communicates, even in this heaven realm, impermanence, the rhythms and flow of time, the particularities of the moment and place, and the richness of seasonal change, all underlying themes that thread through this collection and the way its material is presented (A IV 117–120). Bodhi took the trouble to consult a research biologist from the University of Western Australia to render accurately the stages of floral development involved in this section (pp. 1083–85; notes 1586–93, pp. 1787–88). 'The Sevens' also starts to include more detailed meditational advice, as in delineation of the seven types of mastery of concentration (A IV 34).

'The Eights' starts to place an increasing emphasis on loving kindness, and we are introduced to lay practitioners, in some of the most memorable *suttas* of the collection, which are not found elsewhere. Celebrations of the *uposatha* are also extolled, and larger timespans intrude, as in *suttas* including one in which the happiness and extended life times of *devas*, where one who keeps the *uposatha* will be reborn, are compared favourably to the benefits of kingship (A IV 251–56). With 'The Nines', we find the movement to the larger cosmological picture, and the nine abidings of different kinds of beings, as well as, from a completely different and earthy perspective, even more finely detailed accounts of disciplinary issues. 'The Tens' enlarge the perspective more, with far-ranging exploration of the subtleties of types of views that can distort the mind and various kinds of wrong intention, as well as failures of practice that can corrupt behaviour and monastic welfare. 'The Book of the Elevens' seems to return us a little to the world of the lay practitioner, as well as the monastic. It includes a famous series of texts on lay practice, with similes and metaphors for the recollections not found elsewhere in the canon (A V 328ff), as well as the kind of short list found more frequently in the early part of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*: the text on the eleven benefits of practising loving kindness is one of the most popular chanted protective texts in Southeast Asia today (A V 342). It also contains a series of *suttas* on the kind of transcendent and paradoxical-seeming perception and *jhāna* focussed on *Nibbāna* (A V 318–26).

The *Āṅguttara-nikāya* seems to this reviewer to be at once both utterly practical and 'people orientated', in the lists of *Arahats*, tips for meditation, types of practice and paths, and lists of times for various activities, yet also, of all the four, the one that is the most far-ranging in its trawl through the entire universe, both natural and supernatural, near and far, for subjects for detailed explanation, illustration, and simile. Its close observation includes much on natural phenomena and heavenly wonders. Its metaphors are derived from all kinds of walks of life, from the farmer to the poet; its scope extends out in time and space to include universes and large time schemes, all subjected to detailed examination, such as the varied lights of sun, moon, stars, galaxies and wisdom itself. In case we get 'lost', it then moves back to niceties of monastic discipline. Perspectives shift all

the time: 'types' of people vary. So, the question is asked, who practises loving kindness? Who has attained path? Who is a good practitioner? Who is a bad one? What is a good question? What is a bad question? We are invited to look at beings, views and phenomena from all kinds of angles, and in all kinds of ways. Perhaps its greatest appeal lies in the detail of its very many 'once-off' oddities, golden nuggets found by chance, that make it a kind of compendium of human development and stages of attainment and worth, so different in overall style from the other *Nikāyas*, though sharing also many standard lists and texts found elsewhere. Bodhi's examination of each element is impeccably consistent and thorough. His translation will act as a guide for more translations of texts, for investigation by those who do not share his command of Pāli, or for enjoyment by those who might, after reading one text, feel inclined to pursue its wording further. Such readers will be greatly helped by his extensive and thorough footnotes.

One probably sees and finds in this collection what one wants or needs: the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*'s great virtue is that it just feels like a cornucopia of types of people and their planes of existence, with shifting perspectives on their varied levels of commitment and discipline, on various modes of practice, levels of attainment, as well as its cataloguing of problems that can hit anyone at different stages, and the many kinds of routes to liberation. Bodhi suggests this diversity in his introduction, and throughout is utterly consistent in his usage of terms, technical vocabulary and correct translation. This work will certainly improve our understanding of early Buddhist texts, and I am sure it will continue to be consulted for decades to come.