

Review

Valerie J. Roebuck (ed. and trans.), *The Dhammapada*. London and New York: Penguin, 2010. lxxiv + 246pp. ISBN: 978-0-140-44941-9 (pbk). £9.99/\$15.

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KEYWORD: Dhammapada.

This book is a gem. It is scholarly, comprehensive and accessible, introducing the reader not only to one Pāli text but to the dhammapada genre in general. It is divided into three main parts: an introductory academic essay; a new translation of the Pāli Dhammapada; notes that give, in summary form, the commentarial narrative connected with each verse. In addition, there is a comprehensive bibliography, a pronunciation guide for Pāli and Sanskrit words, extracts from other early versions of the Dhammapada (Gāndhārī Dhammapada, Patna Dhammapada, the Mahāvastu) and a Glossary.

The introductory essay first surveys the meaning of 'Dhammapada' (a word or verse of the Dhamma), the format of the work (423 verses in 26 chapters) and its original accessibility for the ordinary hearer. It then summarizes what we know of the life of the Buddha before turning to Pāli, the Pāli Canon, early Buddhist schools and the Dhammapada as a genre. Roebuck mentions three Prakrit versions, the parallel Sanskrit 'Udānavarga' tradition (collections of inspired utterances of the Buddha), and Chinese and Tibetan translations. The next part of the essay examines the structure of the verses and what this says about oral transmission, before turning to the commentaries (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*), which situate each verse within a narrative involving the Buddha. The next section comments on the Dhammapada as oral literature capable of syntactically expressing agitation as well as calm, drawing metaphors from the worlds of nature, work and war. Previous translations of the Dhammapada are then surveyed, including one of the earliest, a partial translation published in 1840 by Wesleyan missionary in Sri Lanka, Daniel Gogerly. Lastly, Roebuck turns to her own translation to stress that her aim was to be accurate and, at the same time, to 'convey...something of the feeling of the original, the way in which it would have struck its early hearers in the Pali' (p. liii), This meant she was 'committed to a verse translation' (p. liii) and to strategies that would convey the simplicity and plainspeaking of the original.

Does she succeed in these aims? I believe the answer should be a resounding yes. Roebuck's translation is energetic and direct. Retaining a verse form works. She is not afraid to diverge from previous translations in pursuit of clarity. For example, the term *appamāda*, the theme of the second chapter, has been translated as wakefulness, heedfulness, carefulness, zeal, watchfulness and earnestness. It is the opposite of *pamāda*, which means muddiness of thought or indolence. Roebuck translates it

as 'awareness', which succeeds in encompassing a number of these meanings. So verse 21 becomes:

Awareness is the place of the deathless;
 Unawareness is the place of death.
 The aware do not die;
 The unaware are as though dead already.

In other places Roebuck retains a strict literalness. Chapter 10, the *Danda Vagga*, concerns violence, *danḍa* literally meaning a stick or rod used for violent punishment. Some translations translate *danḍa* as violence but Roebuck does not. Verse 129 becomes:

All beings tremble at the rod;
 All are afraid of death.
 Seeing their likeness to yourself,
 You should neither kill nor cause to kill.

Yet, in this and other verses, the reader is addressed as 'you' in preference to the impersonal, 'one', which would be closer to the Pāli. It works. The Dhammapada genre was intended to deliver a direct message and Roebuck successfully puts this across.

The last section, 'Notes', with its summarized commentarial stories, enables the reader to see the verses of the Dhammapada through another important lens. The stories are treasure-trove. Some draw on a common substratum of Indian folklore. Others contain a specifically Buddhist message and some of these are also found in other parts of Buddhist literature. They include *arahants*, ghosts, unfaithful husbands, pretenders, thieves, deities, fires, shipwrecks and hell-realms. Through centuries, they have informed Buddhist art, popular culture and story-telling. The Dhammapada can stand alone without them but there is an impoverishment if it does.

Valerie Roebuck has done a wonderful job in this volume. I do not know a version of this text that is so comprehensive and informative, both for the general reader and the scholar. I have no hesitation in recommending it.