



Revoicing the Buddha

by Mu Soeng

How would the Buddha speak if he were alive today? What vernacular would he use? What would he want to communicate to others? Interpreting the words of the Buddha has always been conditioned by the cultural, social, linguistic, and historical contexts in which his teachings have spread. Again and again, this situational response has been the ‘rewording’ of the Buddha’s message.

It is not simply a matter of Buddhist Pali or Sanskrit words translated into local languages, like Chinese, or Sinhalese, or Thai; or Korean. Rather, it has been a matter of each new Buddhist culture reinterpreting the words of the Buddha in response to their own particular context. In many cases, it has resulted in the reformulation of Buddha’s teachings as found in the earliest texts. Thus, as they were integrated with local worldviews, they were understood as “Buddhism” regardless of the ways it might deviate from the earliest teachings. At the same time, in the midst of all this change, each Buddhist culture has also produced monks, nuns, and thinkers who engaged deeply with the teachings and tried to maintain the spirit of the earliest texts. We can still see this today as Buddhism has gone global.

We can discern from available textual sources that the Buddha traveled widely throughout Magadha and the neighboring kingdoms and offered teachings in a public setting when he was in a town or village. The resulting corpus,

memorized and passed on orally for several generations before being committed to writing, runs into thousands of printed pages. By all accounts, these teachings were situational and spontaneous, in the sense of being offered in response to a question asked by a particular person with a particular need.

Since the Buddha traveled constantly, he met a lot of people and spoke to a wide variety of audiences. They included illiterate farmers and erudite Brahmin scholars; soldiers and merchants; courtiers and rulers. These people spoke a variety of dialects with the consequence that the Buddha employed those same local dialects and a variety of terms to address the same idea to different audiences.

This is helpful for understanding how the Buddha might speak to us today. The Buddha taught mostly within the geographical boundaries of the Magadhan and Kosala kingdoms. For about two hundred years before the Buddha's time, these kingdoms had been home to many shramana teachers (wandering ascetics) who were challenging the paradigms of the Brahmanical culture that was moving eastward into the kingdoms but not yet dominant.

The voices of these wandering ascetics were contesting the religious ideas of the time in a new vernacular. The most fundamental tension may be characterized as between a culture of acquisition and possession, and a culture of self-restraint and renunciation. Today we may understand this conflict as the fate of the individual in a society in determining how to live a life of depth, meaning, and flourishing. We also live today in a cacophonous tower of Babel with social media outlets in which each voice tries to drown out the other. But our search for personal meaning is as intense as ever.

Based on what we see in the early texts, we would expect that if the Buddha were to decide to teach today, he would employ the dialect and the vocabulary of today's audience to speak of the same core idea that he wanted to convey to audiences in his own historical time: the condition of the human being in the world.

The inherited historical and cultural varieties of the twenty-six-hundred-year-old Buddhist tradition invariably point to the difficulty of pinpointing any one core teaching. Each local variety of “Buddhism” is saturated with the color of its immediate context of folklore and legends. But today we are fortunate to have access to reliable translations from Pali and Sanskrit. Still, the issues of editing, revising, formalizing, and codifying the teachings throughout generations continue to haunt scholars who endeavor to discern a cohesive worldview embedded in the early texts. At the same time, it can be acknowledged that communication is slippery because different words in different languages suggest different meanings.

Still, from these teachings, we can see a picture of what the Buddha was trying to communicate to his audiences and how these teachings continue to be of great relevance to us today. In my view—perhaps a minority view—the core message of the Buddha may be summarized as a braiding of two interconnecting strands: the crafting of a noble person; and the crafting of a community of noble persons. The long-established homage to the “three jewels” of the Buddha (the teacher), Dharma (teaching from which a noble disciple-in-training in different times and places is inspired), and Sangha (the community of similarly inspired people) is a tribute to the two interconnecting strands.

We could say that the Buddha was trying to form a coherent, unified picture of human experience in which he emphasized the centrality of stress and anguish (*dukkha*) in human existence. His approach was phenomenological and existential. It was focused on the investigation of one’s personal experience and moved away from the metaphysical and conceptual frameworks of his time. His timeless insight into the dependent-arising of each phenomenon in interaction with other phenomena remains as true as ever.

The reworded sutras in this volume overlap with and cross boundaries between our contemporary vocabulary and

the selected Pali suttas in the hope that the Buddha's teaching as I understand it comes through.

All of the Buddha's core teachings in each new generation and each new geographical setting have required audiences to interpret for themselves. In requiring interpretation, they bridge time and distance. The core template in these teachings is that the mind, itself conditioned, is the primary author of one's destiny (of woe or well-being) and the authorship of the mind is as relevant today as it was in the Buddha's time, and all the generations since then.

The Buddha did not try to identify an underlying reality behind the phenomena, as some of his contemporary teachers were trying to do (or as religions often seek to do). Instead, he emphasized how humans could perceive their default mode of craving for phenomena which inevitably creates layers upon layers of mental defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion. This default mode entrenches a person into ignorance of the true nature of phenomena which is transience, insubstantiality, and stress.

Instead, the Buddha pointed out that when one understands and internalizes the nature of phenomenal things as embedded in impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and without substance, one becomes equanimous regarding their reactivity as pleasant or unpleasant with regard to objects of desire. One does not cling to them nor does one cling to views and opinions. When the root cause of ignorance is destroyed through cultivating tolerance, compassion, and wisdom, mental defilements are eradicated. It allows one to live a harmonious life by avoiding conflict and withdrawing the mind from the inner and outer turmoil caused by unwholesome views, unwholesome intentions, and unwholesome actions in regard to phenomenal things.

Today's levels of stress and anguish have become magnified multiple times over what they seem to have been in the Buddha's own time. Granted, we live in more complex times but our stress and anguish have also become correspondingly more complex. The fate of the individual in

the phenomenal world remains as fraught with anxiety and despair as it ever was.

Today we can think of the heart of the Buddha's teachings as an invitation to self-examination—examining our own consuming desires and addiction to them—and the harm they have caused us, individually and collectively. This inquiry opens up a new perspective on self-correction: the cultivation of mindfulness with regard to how the unwholesome can be transformed into the wholesome.

The recovery of the existential urgency in the Buddha's teachings and their exhortation for each person to take responsibility for crafting their life in response is my primary concern in the texts in this collection.

If a person (Pali: *puthujjana*; often translated as “an uninstructed worldling”) is in the grip of greed, hatred, and delusion, there must be a different way of living in the world because greed, hatred, and delusion are, definitionally, a condition of harm—harm to oneself and to others. In a morally oriented world, harm is a cycle of self-perpetuation unless modified by kindness, compassion, and empathy. It is only through the cultivation of these qualities that dukkha can be let go as the prevailing default human condition.

At the same time, human beings do not live in isolation, whether saints in the forest or householders. The tendency of humans living with each other is to manipulate others for the sake of self-interest and self-aggrandizement. For the Buddha, the vision of a community of noble persons was horizontal, non-hierarchical, non-coercive, and non-manipulative. It sought to empower each person to live “alone with others,” to interact with others with kindness and compassion, and without the dysfunction and harmfulness of unwholesome togetherness.

I believe there is a significant difference between what I take to be the Buddha's teachings in the earliest discourses with their envisioning of optimal human living and the many forms of “Buddhism” that have sprouted from their wide dissemination. This difference invites me to return to the

earliest available teachings. Fortunately, the fluidity of Buddhist traditions gives its admirers the opportunity for self-correction.

In this “self-correction” approach, the core message of the Buddha, as I understand it, is that nothing whatsoever in this phenomenal world is worth clinging to (epitomized in the Pali phrase of the Buddha: *sabbe dhamma nalam abhinivesya*). The task of a “noble” person is to let go of all varieties of clinging, from views and opinions to conceptualizations of identity and belonging, as well as varieties of hankering after food, sex, sleep, fame, and wealth.

This approach holds the view that human beings generally live in a stage of existential crisis, of one kind or another, because even as they may pursue spiritual practice, they typically turn away from investigating their layers of clinging. The Buddha’s suggestion for negotiating a way out of our existential crisis is to live a life of non-clinging. That way/path seems is still relevant to us today.

Today there are reasonably reliable translations of the vast textual corpus of the Buddha’s teachings in Pali and Sanskrit into English and European languages. At the same time, it can be acknowledged that communication is slippery because different words in different languages dissect the world in different ways.

The community founded by the Buddha was missionary in its orientation and scope. He sent his monks out to the four corners of the ancient Magadhan kingdom, and beyond, to spread the message of the four noble truths and the eightfold path. The Buddha offered a simple inspiration that could be easily presented to the average person without a specialist to interpret it for them. Of course, the success of the Buddha’s packaged teachings succeeded because the missionary monks were embodiments of the message. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the medium was the message.

The Buddha himself walked through the towns and villages of ancient India for nine months of the year. He stopped for three months in one location only because the

heavy monsoon rains made travel almost impossible on the roads and forest trails he traveled. He walked his talk, no possessions except the threadbare robe on his back, bare feet, thorny bushes, deadly snakes, and dusty road.

During his missionary walks, the Buddha spoke in the language of crops and growing seasons to the farmer. He spoke to the householder's stress as much as to the concerns of the merchants and the royal courtiers in his audiences.

The hallmark of the Buddha's teaching was that he employed parables and similes. Today, those ancient parables and similes function as a meme for contemporary Buddhist practitioners. They help evaluate the relevance of the teaching for us. As memes, these ancient parables and similes have enough elasticity for us to reword them in a new vernacular for our own time and place.

Because the Buddha taught orally, the community that grew up around him was held together in part by a network of memorization and interpretation. The monks specializing in memorization of the spoken words of the Buddha were called the *bhanaka* (Pali; reciters). But if memorization alone was to be the primary function, these communities would have most likely evolved along the lines of the Brahmin priesthood who memorized and recited the Vedas as exclusive specialists.

However, interpretation has remained a vital part of Buddhist communities. In each generation monks and nuns engaged in an interpretation of the Buddha's teachings to the best of their ability. Throughout the intervening millennia, the teachings of the Buddha have remained memetic. The function of a meme is to be "transformational" in the sense that if you "get" it, it makes a difference in how you think about yourself and the world around you. This is also the function of parables and similes in the apocryphal tales of Mulla Nasiruddin and the stories of the Zen masters that continue to hold a fascination for us.

The Zen Buddhist tradition speaks of "turning words" to indicate the possibility of a listener's mind jolted into recognition of some transformational insight while listening to

the words of a Zen teacher. For a Zen student, the task of personal transformation begins right there, with those turning words.

The teachings of the Buddha as presented in the rewordings in this collection can function in the same way that “turning words” did for a Zen student. A meme is different from codified knowledge, whether in religion or philosophy. A meme, in the way I am understand it in Buddhist context, is also a “turning word,” a matter of personal interpretation and personal rewording.

As a parallel tool, the words of the Buddha are “pointing to” rather than an injunction that makes demands. The well-known Buddhist teaching of distinguishing between the moon itself and the finger pointing to the moon comes to mind readily in how to engage with these words. They point to psychological truths in the human condition. As such, they inspire each person to look into their condition and figure out where the structures of their own psychological lives match the insights offered in the Buddha’s teachings. These words are meant to investigate the self, persuade the self, and change one’s own psychological structures. Any positive change must be a result of self-discovery rather than coercion.

Even as the Buddha taught that suffering (*dukkha*) is largely self-imposed, he did not ignore the biological aspects of birth, aging, sickness, and dying, but his broader concerns are with how each person creates their own layer of suffering through their peculiar cravings and clinging. His teaching has had a useful collaboration in recent decades with contemporary disciplines of psychotherapy, evolutionary psychology, and neuroscience, among others. Hence, it is in some ways even more relevant to the contemporary person’s need to understand their own mind.

The distinguished historian of Pali literature, Bimala Churn Law, has written, *“According to Indian tradition, a commentary means reading new meanings back into old texts according to one’s own education and outlook. It explains the words and judgments of others as accurately and faithfully as*

possible; and this remark applies to all commentaries, Sanskrit as well as Pāli.” (*A History of Pali Literature*, 200)

It is in this spirit that the collection of “sutras” in this issue is offered within the Zen-inspired genre of “understanding one’s own mind.” In a best-case scenario, in the practice traditions of Buddhism, the teacher plays the role of a guide to help the student understand one’s mind. This may be done through textual study, oral dispensation, group practice, personal practice, or another modality.

In putting this collection together, I am encouraged by the words of a contemporary Buddhologist, Florin Deleneau:

“I have nothing against New Age approaches and re-interpretation of Buddhist philosophy in a new modern key. On the contrary! I think they should be as bold and creative as they choose to be. Such creativity is not only in tune with the paradigm of our times but also helps Buddhism develop as a living system of ideas and practices. What I feel rather objectionable is that (quite?) a few modernizing approaches present themselves as faithful reflections of traditional Buddhist doctrines and practices. Boldness should, I believe, be also directed at the admission that our modern adaptations, or at least part of them, may depart from the historically attested corpus of teachings and praxis.” (Florin Deleneau, Research Notes on Rebirth in Mainstream Buddhism: Beliefs, Models, and Proofs, *Bulletin of the International Institute for Buddhist Studies*, vol. 3, 2020).

My reflections in these recreated sutras are not literal translations of traditional Buddhist doctrines. Nor is there any attempt or intention to invoke an “original Buddhism.” But the idea remains constant: the thought and practice of Buddha’s teaching is not theology; it is a toolkit for personal transformation, for understanding how one’s own mind has created its web of dukkha (stress and anguish) and how it alone

can get out of it. The great message at the core of the Buddha's teachings is that it is possible for the conditioned mind to liberate itself from its own conditioning.

I like to think of the sutras in this collection as yet another toolkit in the expanding library of Buddhist resources in the West that have been developing over the last two centuries. All of these toolkits share the common aspiration for understanding how the classical teachings of the Buddha may inform our lives today. These tools come in different shapes and sizes, different colors, guises, and heft but they all serve the same purpose: the conditioned mind to liberate itself.

The hope in this rewording/revoicing the teachings of the Buddha, as I understand them, is that the reader may find something insights that functions for them as a "turning word" and be personally transformative. The human proclivity to create our own suffering continues unabated in each one of us. And each one of us seeks ways to find relief from stress and anguish.

My hope is that in the suffocations of a complex society, a reader can reimagine these sutras as echoes of what was spoken and heard in the gardens of Lumbini, in the Jeta grove, and Anathapindika's park. Reworded for sure, but whispers carried on the wings of time.