

Editorial

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I shall soon be 79, and I have to face the fact that my energy and stamina are decreasing. It is only sensible to plan my withdrawal from leadership of the OCBS. This would be a great deal easier if I had met with more success in raising funds. After 12 years of official existence (14 years if one adds in the unofficial beginnings) the OCBS still has no endowment and we never seem to have more – sometimes less – than enough in the kitty to keep us going for a further year.

Restricting my range of ideas and ambitions, I am now giving priority to trying to save Pali, and with it the serious study of early Buddhism. Of course there are many people (mostly monks) in the Theravada countries who know Pali, in some sense, but hardly any of them communicate in a European language or understand what I mean by “serious study”; I have documented in previous editorials their absence from the scene of international scholarship. In the rest of the world, Pali cannot be said to be flourishing. Even in Britain – even in Oxford! -- there is no longer any university post dedicated to Pali; nor can we see any hope of finding the money to establish one.

Dissatisfied with the available primers, I have gradually compiled my own, giving the copyright to the OCBS. I have used it in the intensive introductory courses I have given, on average over once a year, since 2005. I claim that my course, short though it is, enables its students to read prose texts in the Pali canon; and the results appear to justify this claim. Six months ago, at the urging and with the massive help of Ilona Budapesti, an IT expert, I began trying to reach a wider audience by teaching the course live on line, and have so far delivered 3 courses. I think I am getting the hang of it. After a lifetime of teaching pupils present in the flesh, it is disconcerting to have so little scope for personal contact. The same goes for the contact between the pupils which

is essential to my teaching method. The pupils have different expectations, and some enrol without understanding that to succeed in the course requires undivided attention: to carry on a job, even part-time, during the days of the course is not going to work. On the other hand, on line courses allow me to teach more people at once, and especially if I can call on the help of competent Teaching Assistants.

However, even if I were to do nothing more for the rest of my life but teach Pali – and there are in fact some other ways in which I would like to spend the time remaining to me – that would not achieve my true goal, which is to establish knowledge of Pali, and with it a rational critical approach to the texts, as widely as possible. I need to train more teachers – who can in their turn train further teachers, and so on down the generations.

My intensive introductory course is a solid foundation, but it is too short to be enough to make a teacher; the same goes for the critical approach with which I accompany and enliven the teaching of the language, and also have tried to exemplify in my publications. It is not, I believe, that one should -- or could -- create a further course on much the same lines as the first. It is just that on the first course people have not had time to read nearly enough. They need more experience.

What can we do to provide that experience? We have started a Pali Reading Club, again over the Internet; see our website. Alexander Wynne is leading it, but he will need back up if it is to endure. I have always offered to provide an “advanced” reading course in Oxford if any group of three or more could agree on a time and an agenda. I have had very few requests. But I don’t give up so easily, so this summer, at the time when I have usually been holding the introductory course (which is also when some cheap accommodation is available) I shall lead a 9-day reading course for up to ten people. If that goes well, I shall probably repeat it – with different texts.

In the end, however, there is little that one person can do, and the extent to which I succeed will depend on how many people share my enthusiasm for studying the texts which constitute our evidence for the Buddha’s teachings and are prepared to devote time and effort to that study.

So, finally, how good is that evidence? In 2014, as a supplement to vol.5 of this journal, we published a monograph, 158 pages long, by Bhikkhu Sujato and Bhikkhu Brahmali, entitled “The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Tradition”. It is an answer to that all-important question, and in my view it could hardly be bettered. But people do not read, and they particularly avoid reading

anything which may cast doubt on their prejudices. This applies particularly to academics, who in today's world are kept so busy, and under such pressure to publish, that reading has become a rare luxury. This accusation may appear insulting; but it is the only way I can see to respond to much of what is being published, year on year, and taught to students in Western universities. Only within the last few months, for example, scholars have been repeating that the early Upanishads were responding to the Buddha, not vice versa. They do not mention the evidence which contradicts their hypothesis, because if they did they would have to rewrite their work. So they simply ignore it.

As the study of Pali dies out, the truth will disappear, drowned in the tsunami of nonsense. That the Buddha foresaw this is small consolation.