

THE PALI SUTTA-PITAKA

By Dr. Nalinaksha Dutt

The Buddha's teachings are contained in the Sutta-Pitaka which consists of five Nikayas, Namely, The Digha, the Majjhima, the Samyutta, the Anguttara, and the Khuddaka.

The difference in the titles does not always correspond to the contents except in the case of the Samyutta and the Anguttara. In the Digha, there are some long suttas, but most of them are short, and some even shorter than the suttas of the Majjhima. It contains two suttas, Sangiti and Dasuttara, which should have found a place in the Anguttara. In the Majjhima again there are several suttas which are longer than many in the Digha. There are certain groups of suttas, such as the Rajavagga, the Brahmanavagga, and the Vibhangavagga which would not have been out of place in the Samyutta, although it must be admitted that the method and style of the Majjhima and the Samyutta differ greatly.

In the Samyutta, the grouping of the suttas is made under a common label without any reference to the topics. In the Anguttara the title is justified, for the contents are arranged numerically and, at times, the divisions and subdivisions have been strained to maintain the numerical classification.

It even includes the Vinaya topics where they could fit in with the numerical classification. The title Khuddaka Nikaya is not at all justifiable if by khuddaka is meant "small". Perhaps, the intention was that all the suttas, texts or commentaries, which could not be classified in any of the four Nikayas, should be grouped together as a collection of supplementary texts.

The grouping of the suttas into Nikayas does not therefore rest on a very rational basis. It may be that the division is due to the Bhanaka system prevalent in the early days. Writing was unknown then, and so the Buddha's sayings, as collected by his disciples, were committed to memory by a group of monks and were handed down to their disciples orally.

There were probably two such groups, who, in order to distinguish themselves from each other, became known as DighaBhanakas and Majjhima-Bhanakas. The other two Nikayas were later developments, their object being only to rearrange the topics dealt with in the Digha and the Majjhima. As it is not within the scope of this article to deal with all the Nikayas separately, a brief account of only the Digha-Nikaya is given.

The Digha-Nikaya consists of three books containing thirty-four suttas, of which about sixteen might be described as long. The first suttanta, Brahmajala, has two parts, the first enumerating the superstitious beliefs and popular games and entertainments, and the second summing up the various doctrinal and philosophical speculations in vogue at the time. The second suttanta, Samannaphala, also has two parts, the first stating the doctrines of the six heretical teachers and the second the benefits derived in an ascending order by a monk of the Buddhist Sangha. The next three suttantas, Ambattha, Sonadanda and Kutadanta, for the most part, discuss the injustice of the Brahmanical view that brahmanas were entitled to certain privileges by birth. The superiority of the ideal of life envisaged by the Buddha is also brought out in contrast. The sixth (Mahali), the seventh (Jaliya) the tenth (Subha), and the twelfth (Lohicca) suttantas revert to the topics of Samannaphala in a slightly different manner.

The eleventh sutta (Kevatta) shows that the Buddha was superior to the gods headed by Brahma inasmuch as he alone was able to answer a question which the gods were not. We find here Brahma leading the questioner away and telling him that he could not, in the presence of other gods, say that he did not know the answer to the question. He then referred the questioner to the Buddha.

The eighth (Kassapa-Sihanada) suttanta speaks of the various ascetic practices prevalent during the time of the Buddha, while the ninth (Pothapada) introduces us to the type of discourses usually delivered to the wanderers (paribbajakas). Both of these suttantas also refer to the fruits which the Buddhists acquired through holy practices. The thirteenth (Tevijja) suttanta refutes the notion that the Brahmaloaka can be reached through the methods prescribed by the Vedic seers and teaches how one can attain it through self-restraint and the practice of the four Brahmaviharas, viz., love, compassion, joy at the success of others, and equanimity.

The Second book of the Digha-Nikaya contains suttantas, almost all of which have a Maha prefixed to the title. The first, Mahapadana, deals with the lives of the seven Buddhas who came before Gautama Buddha and describes in detail the life of Vipassi, which is but a replica of Sakyamuni's life. The Mahanidana, as its name implies, gives an exposition of the Law of Causation and discusses the various forms of beings. By far the best suttanta of this Nikaya is the Mahaparinibbana, which gives a realistic account of the last days of the Buddha's life. Particularly important are the names of the villages through which he passed on his way to Kusinagara and the last instructions he gave for the well-being of the Sangha. He stressed the observance of precepts, meditation, knowledge and emancipation, and laid down four rules to ascertain the authenticity of Buddhavacanas.

He also recommended to lay devotees a visit to Kapilavastu, Gaya, Benaras and Kusinagara. His last words were: Vayadhamma Sankhara appamadena sampadetha. (All constituted things are subject to decay and so perform your duties diligently). The suttanta ends with a vivid account of the cremation of the Buddha's body and the division of his relics.

The main object of the next five suttantas (xvii-xxi) is to prove that owing to the fact that many inhabitants of Kasikosala, Vajji-Malla, Ceti-Vamsa, Kuru-Pancala, Maccha Surasena and Anga-Magadha followed the Buddha's teachings, the number of entrants to heaven increased greatly. Of the five suttantas, the Mahasudassana is an off-shoot of the Mahaparinibbana and gives an account of the past greatness of Kusinagara. The Mahagovinda, a story of the past, is particularly important in that it likens India to a cart, and divides it into seven provinces, viz, Kalinga, Potana, Avanti, SoviraVideha, Anga, and Kasi. This suttanta appears also in the Mahavastu. Like the Tevijja-suttanta, it dilates on the merits of the practice of the four Brahmaviharas.

The last two suttantas of the volume are the Mahasatipatthana and the Payasi. In the former the path of mindfulness is exhaustively explained. It consists in keeping the mind (sati) alert (upatthana) to what is happening to one's body and feelings. It also exhorts one to perform the duties and to acquire the virtues prescribed by the Buddha.

The other suttanta is named after a Khattiya teacher and philosopher called Payasi, who upheld the materialistic doctrine that there was no rebirth after death, and that the acts of a being, good or bad, were not productive of any effects. This view was refuted by Kumara Kasspa, a distinguished disciple of the Buddha.

The third volume contains eleven suttas, of which the first four (xxiv-xxvii) deal mainly with non-Buddhistic views and ascetic practices. This suttanta reiterates from the Brahmajala-suttanta, some of the non-Buddhistic views about the beginning of the world. The next Suttanta, the Udumbarika-sihanada, speaks of some of the evil effects of rigorous ascetic practices while the Cakkawattisihanada admonishes the Buddhists to be self-reliant and make the Dhamma their sole refuge.

Although the Buddha disapproved of any speculation regarding the origin of the world, the Agganna-suttanta explains how the world began, and denounces the Brahmana's claim to superiority by birth.

The next two suttantas, the Smpasadaniya and the Pasadika, contain the gist of the Buddha's teachings and moral instructions. The latter suttanta was delivered

when dissension occurred among the followers of Nigantha Nataputta soon after his death, and contains (i) a reference to a view of Uddaka Ramaputta, (ii) an exposition of the term "sukhallikanu-yoga" appearing in the Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta, and (iii) a justification for leaving some questions unanswered as did the Teacher.

The Lakkhana-suttanta discusses in detail the acts by which a person acquires the thirty-two signs of great men.

The Sigalovada-suttanta is very important in view of the fact that it is the only comprehensive discourse delivered by the Buddha for the benefit of the lay devotees. It is regarded by some scholars as the source of Asoka's Dhamma.

The Atanatiya-suttanta is described as a magic spell for the protection of lonely monks from evil-minded yaksas.

The last two suttantas summarize the teachings of the Buddha as in the Anguttara-nikaya. Of these, the Dasuttara, which is the last, follows the catechetical method.