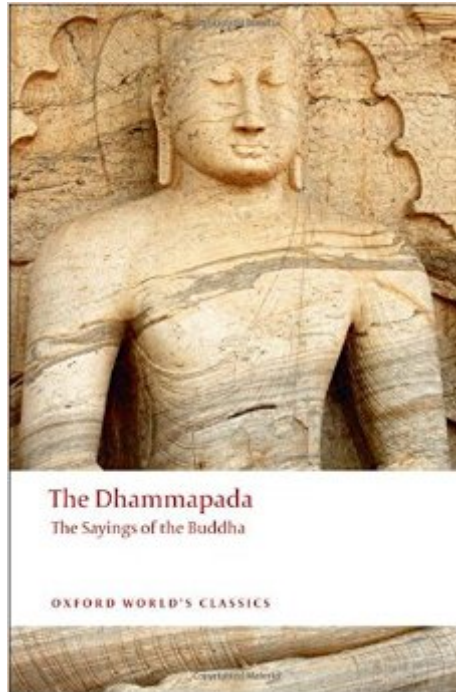


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The Dhammapada: The Sayings Of The Buddha (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

The Dhammapada, the Pali version of one of the most popular texts of the Buddhist canon, ranks among the classics of the world's great religious literature. Like all religious texts in Pali, the Dhammapada belongs to the Theravāda school of the Buddhist tradition, adherents of which are now found primarily in Kampuchea, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Dhammapada, or "sayings of the dhamma," is taken to be a collection of the utterances of the Buddha himself. Taken together, the verses form a key body of teaching within Buddhism, a guiding voice along the struggle-laden path towards true enlightenment, or Nirvana. However, the appeal of these epithets of wisdom extends beyond its religious heritage to a general and universal spirituality. This edition provides an introduction and notes which examine the impact that the text has had within the Buddhist heritage through the centuries.

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Customer Reviews

The Dhammapada is a deeply-inspiring religious text and the best-known work of the Theravada Buddhist canon. It consists of 423 short verses arranged in 26 chapters which cover, in brief form,

the major aspects of the Buddha's teachings from the most mundane to the deepest. About 25 percent of the verses appear elsewhere in the Theravada Buddhist canon. In many Buddhist countries, children memorize this text which has much to teach both the learned and the simple. In its combination of simplicity and depth, the closest analogue to the Dhammapada in the Jewish-Christian Scriptures is the book of Psalms. The Dhammapada has been well-served by many excellent translations. The translation under review here, by John Ross Carter, Professor of Philosophy at Colgate University, and Mahinda Palhawandana, Professor of Sanskrit Emeritus in Sri Lanka, is unique in its care and in the scope of its learning. In addition to the text, this translation includes line-by-line translations of the earliest Sri Lankan commentaries on the Dhammapada. These commentaries were written over the course of many centuries and systematized in about 1000 A.D. There is a separate and later series of commentaries on the text in which stories were written to illustrate the events that gave rise to the Buddha's utterance of each verse. These stories are not included here, but they are summarized in another well-known translation of the Dhammapada by the monk Narada, which I shall mention below. This edition begins with a scholarly introduction to the text and the commentaries followed by an English rendition of the text of the Dhammapada without commentary. The next section of the book repeats the English translation together with the Pali text with the addition of the extensive commentary. Each chapter is arranged in accordance with the commentarial arrangement in which some verses are considered singly and others are combined in groups. Following the translation of text and commentary, there is a series of notes. Some of these notes deal with points of grammar while others describe in detail points of Buddhist teaching to illuminate the text and commentary. The goal of this detailed presentation is to make the Dhammapada and its ancient interpretations available so that the interested reader may study the text with his or her own eyes. As Carter and Palihawanana state in their introduction (p. 9): "It was our endeavor to make this work as much as possible a 'stitching of the centuries'. What this reveals is on the one hand the prodoundly evocative power of the religious sentiments expressed in the text, and on the other the conservatism of the tradition that interprets the text as we see in these documents. ... But from the way we set about it, what is of singular importance is the arrangement of this book: presenting the text itself as a text and presenting the history of its study in the setting of a growing tradition of interpretation.... We wanted to make the text, as something in human hands, to point forward from the past through present into the future." I want to give two brief examples from the translation. First, verse 183 of the Dhammapada is universally regarded as offering the shortest, most basic statement of the Buddha's teaching. Here it is in Carter and Palihawadana: "Refraining from all that is detrimental, The attainment of what is

wholesome, The purification of one's mind: This is the instruction of Awakened Ones. "Note how the translation avoids the use of the word "bad" in line one and "good" in line two. Many might question this. But the point of this translation is to avoid the theistic connotations many Western readers will bring to the words "good" and "bad". Also note the term "Awakened Ones" in the final line rather than the more literal and traditional translation, "all the Buddhas". The difference points in the direction of universalizing the teaching rather than, perhaps, limiting it by sectarianism. I want to look briefly at verse 1 of the Dhammapada which is basic to much of what follows in the text. It is also perhaps the most difficult verse in the work. Here it is in Carter and Palihawadana: "Preceded by perception are mental states, For them is perception supreme, From perception have they sprung. If, with perception polluted, one speaks or acts, Thence suffering follows As a wheel the draught ox's foot." Most translation of verse 1 speak in terms of "the mind." Thus, Narada translates the beginning of the verse: "Mind is the forerunner of (all evil) states. Mind is chief: mind-made are they." ... Carter and Palihawadana try to present the text in a way that will not encourage the Western reader to equate it with the idealism of Plato or Berkeley. The verse remains a difficult and deep teaching on any reading. I have the good fortune to participate in a Sutta Study Group where we read the Dhammapada chapter-by-chapter over the course of about one year. We used Carter and Palihawadana together with several other translations, as we discussed and debated and tried to understand the Dhammapada together. The reader may not be lucky enough to have access to such a group, but the Dhammapada is a work that will reward individual study at any level. Some readers may find Carter and Palihawadana more than they need to begin. But for those wanting to make a detailed study of this great text, this work is invaluable.

FAIR WARNING: This book of 112 pages is NOT the same as the book that has received praise for its scholarly and careful commentary! This abbreviated version does not have the footnotes and the explanation of Pali terms which the expanded, 500+ page version has. Please do NOT purchase this abbreviated version if you expect to use it as a reference version to help you understand the Pali text. Someone should feel ashamed of themselves in selling this abbreviated version to those expecting the original, without noting the helpful scholarly commentaries are gone. It was like being very disappointed in an old friend. I know one person who ordered this text assuming it was the expanded version after I had recommended this translation -- she was very disappointed and so was I. Unfortunately, if you want to purchase the old expanded version, you may have to pay top dollar for a used copy.

I have previously read classic Max Muller's version and some translations found at numerous web-pages. I think this is clearly the best of them. Carter and Palihawadana have retained text's lyric style but still their ambition is to bring authentic text as such to us. Hence readers have to use glossary where most important words and references are. I may be a bit annoying but if you really want to know exactly what is in original dhammapada you have to use such method. Some at web "interpret" too much, then the text may look easier but it may go also wrong. Only negative comment is that people to which English is not native language, text may have too many many fine but unfamiliar words. I recommend this book. It is one of the classics of World's religious teachings.

This short English edition of the Dhammapada, written by two distinguished scholars in the field, and published under Oxford World's Classics series, contains a short introduction and explanatory notes aside from the main text. As such, it forms a handy English version of this very important Buddhist text, useful both as an introduction to it as well as a source of reference. Some previous acquaintance with the tenets of Buddhism is recommended, as this is not an introduction to the Buddha's teachings, and the short length of the text does not allow for thorough discussion of some important concepts. Brevity and succinctness are the name of the game here. The one major deficiency of this text which struck me as a Vipassana meditation practitioner, however, was that the explanations offered to quite a number of verses by the authors attest to a significant lack of understanding which can only be gained through the practice of insight meditation. I will mention a few examples. First, in their explanation of the very famous v. 113, the authors interpret "seeing the rise and demise" of phenomena as an intellectual understanding of the concept, while this verse is commonly known among Vipassana practitioners to refer to an advanced and defining stage of the practice where one sees clearly (and not conceptually) into the moment-to-moment rising and passing away of phenomena (the authors make no mention of this). A similar misinterpretation is given to v. 374, which alludes to the positive mental states which emerge in connection with witnessing the rising and passing away of phenomena during advanced meditation practice. In their explanation to v. 279 ("All dhammas are without self"), the authors point out that the characteristic sign of no-self "is not as wide-embracing as the first two" (impermanence and unsatisfactoriness), but "restricted to 'dhammas', that is, all aspects of consciousness." That is no small a deviation from the teachings of the Buddha, who taught that all conditioned phenomena are characterized by lack of an abiding self, as "again one clearly perceives through intensive Vipassana practice. In their commentary to v. 295 ("Having slain the tiger's domain, as fifth"), the authors suggest a metaphorical representation of the "five hindrances", which "deflect virtuous qualities";

again, as any meditator knows, the precise function of the five hindrances is to hinder one from deepening their meditation practice, and thus their understanding of the dhamma and the resulting purification of mind. Here, again, there is no reference to the significance of the five hindrances in the context of meditation practice, a central pillar of the "Noble Eightfold Path". And so, perhaps what this book serves to teach us most of all, is how essential is the practice of insight meditation to gaining a full and true understanding of the Buddha's teachings, aside from the accumulation of textual knowledge.

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