

Free the Dhamma

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The Sutta Nipāta, an early collection of poetry in the Pali Canon, contains a dramatic discourse (Sn 1:4) in which a wealthy brahman farmer chides the Buddha for not farming. If he were to farm, the brahman argues, he wouldn't have to go for alms. This was a typical brahmanical criticism of the Buddhist monks in that day: If they want to eat, they should work rather than go begging for food.

The Buddha, however, responds that he too, in his way, is a farmer. The brahman then questions him in verse: What kind of farming does he do?

The fact that the question is in verse is a challenge. To properly answer it, the Buddha has to compose verses on the spot in the same meter as the brahman's question.

The Buddha more than meets the challenge, reciting extemporaneous verses on how the qualities of mind developed in Dhamma practice correspond to different farming skills and implements, yielding the highest fruit: the deathless.

The brahman, impressed by the Buddha's virtuosity, offers him a bowl of milk-rice as a payment for his skill in teaching the Dhamma. But the Buddha rejects the rice, saying that he can't accept such a payment. He then advises the brahman to throw the rice away on a spot where there's no vegetation or into water where there are no living beings.

The brahman drops the rice into water where there are no living beings, and in the words of the discourse: "Just as an iron ball heated all day, when tossed in the water, hisses & sizzles, seethes & steams, in the same way the milk-rice, when dropped in the water, hissed & sizzled, seethed & steamed."

The brahman—in awe, his hair standing on end—goes to the Buddha and throws himself at his feet, asking to take refuge in the Triple Gem and to be accepted into the Saṅgha as a monk. In no long time, we're told, he becomes an arahant.

The drama of this incident makes it hard to miss the point: The Buddha saw any payment for teaching the Dhamma as unacceptable.

Another discourse in the Canon, AN 5:159, shows that this principle applied not only to him personally. When learning that one of his monk disciples is teaching the Dhamma, the Buddha lays out five conditions for how Dhamma should be taught, one of them being, "The Dhamma should be taught with the thought, 'I will speak not for the purpose of material reward.'"

So the Buddha was very clear on this point: It's inappropriate for a monk or nun to accept payment for teaching the Dhamma, or for anyone to teach the Dhamma for the purpose of material reward. The image of the milk-rice hissing and sizzling, seething and steaming, sears this message into the mind.

Which raises the question: What about Dhamma books? Should they not be sold? The Canon doesn't answer this question directly, because there were no Dhamma books when the Buddha taught or the Canon was assembled. Dhamma texts were memorized, as—given the rigorous training in memorization that was perfected in ancient India—it was felt that the person-to-person communication of the Dhamma was more reliable than copying the Dhamma out in writing.

A few centuries later, though, attitudes changed, as some texts almost disappeared during wars in which many of those who had memorized the texts were put to the sword. So people began writing the Dhamma down in the form of manuscripts and books. At that time, those who wrote and received these written texts seemed to have kept the above two passages in mind: A Dhamma book was deserving of special respect. The commentaries to the Pali Canon, for instance, list Dhamma books as a type of memorial, on a par with memorials containing the Buddha's relics. For this reason, some of the earliest written Dhamma works state that they should be bowed down to. Even today in Asia, there's a strong etiquette around how Dhamma books should not be placed on the floor or stepped over. When stored, they should be stored above the head. A book may be an object, but a Dhamma book should be treated as the Dhamma itself.

However, there was the question of whether the scribes who copied Dhamma books should be paid. The general attitude seems to be that professional lay scribes could be paid, but that monks and nuns—in line with the principle stated in AN 5:159—should not.

An additional change came more recently as printing presses came to Theravāda lands, and Dhamma books were mass-produced. In some cases, the printing presses belonged to the monasteries themselves. To cover their costs, the monasteries began putting a price on the books they printed.

This trend brought about a counter-trend: those who insisted that Dhamma books shouldn't be treated like merchandise in the market. Lay printers could be paid to print Dhamma books, according to this view, but once printed, the books should be freely given away. This would provide those who sponsored such books the opportunity to engage in the highest form of giving: the gift of Dhamma (Dhp 354). It would also provide the recipients of such books the heart-warming opportunity to be recipients of a gift of Dhamma, and not just purchasers of Dhamma merchandise.

In Thailand, this latter view has been most forcefully asserted by ajaans in the Forest Tradition. In the rare cases where communities in this tradition have consented to have their books printed for sale, they have never argued that they were doing so in light of anything the Buddha did or said. It was simply for the pragmatic purpose of getting the Dhamma to as many people as possible, and was seen as a concession to the degenerate times in which we live.

Even the monks and lay people outside of the Forest Tradition who sell Dhamma books have never tried to cite the Buddha as their authority for selling their books. Their rationale has been straightforwardly pragmatic: They couldn't afford to print Dhamma books otherwise.

However, now that the Dhamma has come to the West, entrepreneurs who sell Dhamma books have become more aggressive in their reasoning as to why there's nothing wrong with what they are doing. Some have actually cited passages from the Pali Canon that, according to them, show that the Buddha himself would have approved of the practice. This, they say, shows that those who criticize the practice of selling Dhamma books are actually arguing in opposition to the Dhamma.

These arguments avoid mentioning the two passages cited above where the Buddha shows most clearly his attitude toward receiving payment for teaching the Dhamma. But it's good to keep in mind the image of the milk-rice hissing and sizzling as we examine the three sets of reasoning offered by the apologists for the practice of slapping a price on the Dhamma and putting it up for sale.

The first set of reasons are similar to the pragmatic reasons cited in Asia: You get more Dhamma to more people more effectively if you take advantage of the commercial book distribution network already in place here in the West than you do if you give your books away. People can more easily find books offered for sale than those for free distribution, and—because modern people have so little time to judge books for themselves—they can save time by trusting that books offered for sale have been peer-reviewed, and are thus more reliable than Dhamma books given away.

The apologists then cite the Buddha as an authority in support of these considerations by quoting the passage from the Vinaya in which the Buddha first sent his arahant disciples out to spread the Dhamma to as many people as possible:

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks, "I am released, monks, from all snares, human & divine. You, too, monks, are also released from all snares, human & divine. Wander, monks, for the benefit & happiness of many, out of sympathy for the world, for the welfare, benefit, & happiness of devas & human beings. Don't any two of you go by the same way." — *Mv I.11.1*

Now, telling a group of arahants to teach many people is not the same as telling them to print and sell Dhamma books. The Buddha was not a sales manager willing to sacrifice his principles in order to meet quarterly goals. His desire to get the Dhamma to many people was balanced by his sense of fitting and right ways to do it. This point is especially clear when we look at his remarks to the brahman in Sn 1:4. By rejecting the brahman's offer of milk-rice, he risked offending him. And this was not the only instance in which he risked offending his listeners when taking a stand on what's fitting and right. Sn 4:9 tells of another, when he rejected, with a few sharp words, another brahman's offer of his daughter.

The Buddha had standards for when and to whom he would teach the Dhamma. That's why he formulated the *sekhiya* rules in the Pāṭimokkha concerning situations in which it is not proper to teach the Dhamma, all of which deal with situations in which the listener is not showing the proper respect. This means that the Buddha didn't regard his desire to spread the Dhamma far and wide as overriding questions of when it is appropriate or inappropriate to teach. And as Sn 1:4 and AN 5:159 show, teaching the Dhamma for material reward was, in his eyes, inappropriate. So in situations like that, it shouldn't be taught.

Which means that using Mv I.11.1 as an excuse for selling the Dhamma is simply taking it out of its larger context and, as a result, distorting its meaning.

The rise of the Internet has meant that Dhamma books can be distributed widely across the world at no cost at all, so there's no reason to believe that books for sale are more easily obtained than books offered freely.

As for the argument that books for sale can be trusted to have been peer-reviewed: There's always the question of what standards are being used by book publishers when they decide whether to print a book for sale. Even if we limit our attention to academic publishers—those least likely to print a book just because they anticipate a healthy profit—it's an indisputable fact that academic publishers have printed some pretty abominable books about the Buddha's teachings that have done a great deal to foster widespread misunderstandings about Dhamma. It's hard to imagine that the Buddha had these books in mind when he told the arahants to teach the Dhamma out of sympathy for the world.

The second set of arguments draws on an incident reported in SN 3:13. King Pasenadi of Kosala has been eating too much, and one day, right after a heavy meal, he comes to see the Buddha, breathing heavily. The Buddha senses that the king is overeating, so he recites this verse:

For a person always mindful,
knowing moderation in the food he's obtained,
his pains grow slender;
gradually he ages, guarding his life.

The king, pleased with the verse, turns to one of his courtiers, a young brahman named Sudassana, and tells him to learn the verse from the Buddha and then to recite it every day when the king is taking his meal. As a reward, he offers Sudassana a considerable stipend: a daily payment of 100 kahapaṇas.

The Buddha teaches the verse to Sudassana, Sudassana recites it every day, and the king begins to restrict his intake of food. Ultimately, when he becomes quite slim, he exclaims over how the Buddha showed sympathy both for his benefit in this life and for his benefit in lives to come.

The apologists for selling Dhamma books cite this passage as proof that the Buddha approved of people getting paid to teach the Dhamma. After all, he didn't object when Pasenadi offered the stipend to Sudassana, and even taught the verse to Sudassana knowing full well that Sudassana would get paid for

reciting it. Ergo: The Buddha approved of the general principle that people be paid for teaching the Dhamma.

This is a particularly tone-deaf interpretation of the sutta. To begin with, the Buddha was not so foolish as to interfere in the way the king ran his palace, telling the king how he should or shouldn't reward his lackeys. And that's what Sudassana is: the king's lackey. By accepting payment, Sudassana is affirming his servitude to the king. And of course, the king wouldn't pay Sudassana for reciting any passage of Dhamma that he didn't want to hear. He who pays the piper calls the tune.

So the actual message of the passage is that if you accept payment for teaching the Dhamma, you're putting yourself in the position of a lackey, free to teach only what your audience is willing to buy.

The third set of arguments takes the following passage as its jumping off point:

“Monks, there are these two kinds of gifts: a gift of material things & a gift of the Dhamma. Of these two kinds of gifts, this is supreme: a gift of the Dhamma.”
— *Iti* 98

Here the apologists, after noting the canonical distinction between gifts of material things and gifts of the Dhamma, and the superiority of the latter, come up with a novel way of interpreting the distinction when applied to Dhamma books. A book, they say, is not Dhamma. It's just a material thing. So giving a Dhamma book is a lower form of generosity. The actual gift of Dhamma occurs when one teaches the Dhamma. In the context of Dhamma writings, they claim, the actual gift occurs when a writer, without ulterior motive, puts the Dhamma into writing. Whether that Dhamma is then printed in a book for sale or in one offered for free distribution doesn't alter the fact that the superior gift of Dhamma has already been given.

This argument is based on a bizarre misunderstanding of the act of giving. In reality, a gift doesn't become a gift until it's been given freely to a recipient. In a genuine gift of Dhamma, a teacher puts the Dhamma into words and freely conveys those words to a recipient. Until there's a recipient, there's no gift. And if the recipient has to pay for the words, there's certainly no gift. The mere act of writing the Dhamma doesn't count as a gift at all.

The fact that people who make this third argument understand so little about something as basic as the act of giving raises the question of how they can be trusted to know anything else of the Dhamma.

I've often been told that people in the West don't appreciate free books, and that they measure a book's value by its monetary price. So, to convince Westerners that Dhamma books are worthwhile, those books should have a price attached to them. Only then will Westerners want to read them.

But surely, one of the purposes of spreading the Dhamma is to change people's attitudes, and in particular to get them to stop measuring value by

monetary price. The best way to do that is to offer high-quality Dhamma books for free, as evidence that the price of an object is no indication of its quality, and that generosity is a heart-warming activity. I know of many people who initially regarded free Dhamma books with suspicion—as one person told me, she assumed that a free-distribution book was worth what she paid for it, i.e., nothing—only to learn that some free Dhamma books were free because they were too valuable to have a price.

The Buddha taught generosity as the bedrock of the practice. The best way to teach generosity is not to get someone to buy a book on the topic, but to practice generosity yourself, as when you give the Dhamma freely. When people have to pay for a Dhamma book, the fact that they can't get the book without paying for it places a barrier between them and the Dhamma on the one hand, and between them and the teacher on the other. When they obtain a Dhamma book as a gift, those barriers are torn down.