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CANONICAL BUDDHIST TEXTS - A SUMMARY
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This is a summary of the principal texts discussed in Sangharakshita's book "The Eternal Legacy" (Tharpa Publications, London, 1985; distributed by Wisdom Books). I have attached brief comments to most, which simply state what they are, based on what Sangharakshita says about them. In places, this means that I have compressed whole chapters of his book into a couple of sentences. Of course, only I am to blame for any resulting errors or distortions.

Questions about the summary are best answered by reading the book.

A notable omission from Sangharakshita's book is Zen Buddhism. While some of the works listed here are important in Zen, specifically Zen works, such as the Platform Sutra of Hui Neng, are hardly discussed at all. Is there anyone who can give a similar "road map" of the Zen literature?

It is also restricted to the canonical literature -- that is, the texts which are, purport to be, or are treated as, the word of the Buddha himself. This may be why Zen is omitted, as the specifically Zen texts date from long after the Buddha's time and are not in this sense canonical.

Contemplating this vast array of texts, I am reminded of the wonderful title of a painting by Fuseli: "The Artist in Despair at the Magnitude of Antique Fragments". Can anyone study more than a small fraction in one lifetime? And yet, of course, the same can be said of the entirety of human knowledge -- no-one can know more than a fraction of it. One must choose according to one's goals...which may in turn depend on what one happens to choose to study.

Much of the canon is available in English translation, and more is becoming so. Nearly all of it is available in Japanese translation, which may or may not be useful to the people who read this newsgroup. (The original inquirer went by the name of "Obi Wan"...is that a Japanese name? :-))

Another book by Sangharakshita I would like to mention is "A Survey

of Buddhism", which is exactly that, just as "The Eternal Legacy" is a survey of the canonical literature. Also weak on Zen, though.

No attempt has been made to reproduce the diacritic marks in Sanskrit (Sk.) and Pali words.

1. The Nine Angas (The types of Buddhist texts)

All Buddhist texts fall into one of the following nine angas, or types.

1.1. Sutta (Sk. Sutra)

A discourse or dialogue expounding some argument or exhortation.

1.2. Geyya

Mixed prose and verse; a sutta which contains gathas, such as the first chapter of the Samyutta Nikaya.

1.3. Veyyakarana

Answer, explanation, etc. The Theravadins consider this to mean the Abhidhamma Pitaka; the Mahayanists take it to be predictions of the future career of a disciple.

1.4. Gatha

The Dhammapada, Thera-/Theri-gatha, and those verses of the Sutta-Nipata not called sutta.

1.5. Udana

Literally "breathing out". Expressions of intense spiritual exultation.

1.6. Itivuttaka

"Sayings", beginning with the phrase "Thus it has been said [by the Buddha]".

1.7. Jataka

The canonical stories of previous births of the Buddha. Not to be confused with the later non-canonical stories of the Theravada Jataka Book, relating the Buddha's previous lives as an animal.

1.8. Abbhutadhamma (Sk. Adbhutadharma)

Miracle stories.

1.9. Vedalla (Sk. Vaidalya).

Miscellaneous fragments.

The Sarvastivadins increased these nine classes to 12, by adding:

1.10. Nidana

Summary of another work.

1.11. Avadana

Glorious deeds of the Buddha and his disciples in present and past existences.

1.12. Upadesa

Instruction.

2. The Tipitaka (Sk. Tripitaka) (Three Baskets)

The Tipitaka consists of three classes of writings: the Sutta Pitaka, the Vinaya Pitaka, and the Abhidhamma Pitaka.

2.1. The Sutta Pitaka (The basket of dialogues)

2.1.1. Digha Nikaya (Sk. Dirghagama) (Long Collection)

34 dialogues or discourses in the Pali version, 30 in the Chinese.

2.1.1.1. Silakkhanda-vagga

The first thirteen suttas. Concerned mainly with ethical and spiritual topics.

2.1.1.2. Mahavagga (Great Section)

The next ten suttas. Mainly "legendary" matter.

2.1.1.3. Patika-vagga

The last eleven suttas.

2.1.2. Majjhima Nikaya (Middle Collection)

152 suttas, divided into a first, middle, and final "Fifty", the two extra being included in the last of these. Each "Fifty" is in five sections of ten suttas each (one section of twelve suttas). These divisions are not based on any observable principle of classification.

2.1.3. Samyutta Nikaya (Sk. Samyuktagama)

2889 suttas, in 56 groups. Each group deals with a single topic. The groups are further arranged into 5 vaggas (sections).

2.1.4. Anguttara Nikaya (Sk. Ekottaragama) (Numerical Sayings)

More than 2300 suttas, divided into 11 nipatas (sections), according to numerical value. Section I deals with things of which there are only one, and Section XI deals with things of which there are eleven.

2.1.5. Khuddaka Nikaya (Little, or Minor, Collection)

There is no Sanskrit counterpart to this Nikaya. 15 independent works. 4 more are included by the Burmese Buddhists. The Khuddaka Nikaya includes the following (non-exhaustive; some other members of this group are mentioned elsewhere in this summary).

2.1.5.1. Dhammapada

Verses embodying ethical and spiritual precepts arranged by subject.

2.1.5.2. Udana (Verses of Uplift)

An anthology in 8 sections, each of 10 suttas.

2.1.5.3. Itivuttaka

4 sections, with a total of 112 suttas.

2.1.5.4. Sutta-nipata

The earliest recorded version of the Buddha's teaching. 5 vaggas, of 12, 14, 12, and 16 suttas, the fifth vagga being a single poem in 16 parts. The 5 vaggas are the Uruga-vagga (Snake Section), Culla-vagga (Minor Section), Maha-vagga (Great Section), Atthaka-vagga (Section of Eights), and The Way to the Beyond.

2.1.5.5. Thera-gatha (Sk. Sthavira-gatha) (Verses of the Elder Monks)

264 poems by 259 authors, arranged by length in 21 books. The first book has the poems of one verse, the second poems of two verses, up to the last, a single poem of 71 verses.

2.1.5.6. Theri-gatha (Sk. Sthaviri-gatha) (Verses of the Elder Nuns)

73 poems by 71 authors, arranged by length in 16 books.

2.1.6. The Sutra of 42 Sections

In Chinese; no Pali version. An anthology of extracts from various sutras.

2.2. The Vinaya Pitaka (The monastic rules)

There are seven extant complete recensions, one in Pali and six from Sanskrit. The latter consist of five Chinese versions and one Tibetan. Our richest contemporary source of information on the civilisation and culture of India from the Buddha to Asoka.

2.2.1. The Patimokkha (Sk. Pratimoksa) (Monastic Code)

Relates to the eremitical lifestyle originated during the Buddha's lifetime, and lasting for a century or so.

2.2.2. The Khandakas (Sk. Skandhakas) (Chapters)

Relates to the cenobitical lifestyle which later superseded the eremitical.

2.3. The Abhidhamma Pitaka (The basket of doctrine)

Treated in more detail below.

There are also scattered references in the literature to two other pitakas (now lost?):

2.4. The Bodhisattva Pitaka (a collection of Mahayana works)

2.5. The Dharani Pitaka (a collection of Vajrayana works)

3. The Abhidhamma

The Abhidhamma (Sk. Abhidharma) developed in three stages:

3.1. First stage: Technical discussions of doctrine

This is embodied in certain works already classified in the Sutta Pitaka above, e.g. the Vibhanga-vagga of the Majjhima Nikaya, and parts III and IV of the Samyutta Nikaya.

3.2. Second stage: Detailed, systematic elucidation of doctrine

3.2.1. Nidessa (Teachings)

A commentary on part of the Sutta-Nipata. The 11th book of the Khuddaka Nikaya.

3.2.2. Patisambhida-magga (Path to Analysis)

30 treatises on psychological and ethical topics. This book is the 12th book of the Khuddaka Nikaya,

3.2.3. Sariputra-abhidharma-sastra

Consists of four parts, dealing with questions, non-questions, assimilation and association, and origins. The second of these parts deals with: the 18 psycho-physical elements, karma, persons, knowledge, the links of conditioned co-production, mindfulness, psychic power, concentration, the Path, and the defilements.

3.3. Third stage: the Abhidhamma-Pitaka (the fundamental Abhidharma)

Development of a more abstract, technical vocabulary, comprising a card-index of the whole universe. There is one Pali version, and one Sanskrit one, but they are entirely different.

The Theravada Abhidhamma-Pitaka (Pali) consists of:

3.3.1. Dhamma-sangani (Enumeration of Elements)

An enumeration of the 170 ultimate elements of existence.

3.3.2. Vibhanga

A collection of 18 independent treatises on different doctrinal topics.

3.3.3. Dhatu-katha (Discussion of Elements)

Based on first three sections of the Vibhanga. In 14 sections. Classifies doctrinal categories with reference to the 18 elements of perception (dhatu), the 12 psychophysical bases (ayatana), and the 5 aggregates of existence (khandha).

3.3.4. Puggala-pannatti (Designation of Persons)

Descriptions of various types of persons.

3.3.5. Katha-vatthu

23 sections, each discussing 8 to 12 points of disagreement among the early Schools. 219 such points in toto. Unsystematically arranged.

3.3.6. Yamaka (The Pairs)

"To me it looks as if this book was composed for examination purposes, or to get versed in answering sophisticated and ambiguous, or captious, questions, on all the manifold doctrines and technical terms of Buddhist Philosophy. ... In my opinion, there would be no very great loss to the Abhidharma literature, if this work were altogether not in existence." (Nyanatiloka, "Guide through the Abhidhamma-Pitaka").

3.3.7. Patthana

Analyses the origination of the ultimate elements of existence and the relations among them, in terms of a certain set of causal factors or conditions.

The Sarvastivada Abhidamma-Pitaka (Sanskrit) consists of:

3.3.8. Sangiti-paryaya (Method of Congregational Chanting)

3.3.9. Dharma-skandha (Compendium of Doctrines)

Collection of treatises on various doctrinal topics.

3.3.10. Prajnapti-sastra (Treatise of Designations)

Deals with conventional designations of things, contrasted with what they are in reality.

3.3.11. Vijnana-kaya

Treats a body (kaya) of subjects connected with consciousness (vijnana).

3.3.12. Dhatu-kaya

Analyses the mental states that are the concomitants of consciousness.

3.3.13. Prakarana-pada (Auxiliary Treatise)

Classifies all existence into five categories; describes ten mental factors present in all states of wholesome consciousness; discusses ninety-eight evil propensities, ten kinds of knowledge, one thousand questions concerning doctrinal categories...

3.3.14. Jnana-prasthanam (Establishment of Knowledge)

Encyclopaedic in content, unsystematic in form. Eight sections dealing with, respectively, miscellaneous topics, the fetters, knowledge, intentional acts, the four material elements, the controlling faculties, meditation, and views.

Additional Abhidhamma texts:

3.3.15. Maha-vibhasa (Great commentary)

A commentary on the Jnana-prasthanam.

3.3.16. Abhidharma-kosa-sastra (Treasury of the Abhidharma)

The final systematisation of the Abhidharma.

4. Mahayana texts

The major Mahayana sutras are known as Vaipulya sutras, or discourses of great length. There is no definitive canon.

4.1. Astasahasrika Prajna-paramita (Perfection of Wisdom)

Despite having read some of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, and what Sangharakshita and other authors say about them, I still have no understanding of the doctrine they expound.

27 sutras, including the following (not exhaustive).

4.1.1. Ratnaguna-samcaya-gatha (Verses on the Accumulation of the Precious Qualities of the Perfection of Wisdom)

The second oldest Prajna-paramita text.

4.1.2. Abhisamayalankara (Memorial Verses on the Re-union [with the Absolute])

A summary/table of contents of the Pancavimsati-sahasrika. Included in Conze's "Large Sutra" (see 4.1.3).

4.1.3. Satasahasrika, Pancavimsati-sahasrika, and Astadasa-sahasrika

Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000, 25,000, and 18,000 lines. These are essentially the same work, varying primarily in the extent to which the repetitions are written out. Conze's book "The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom" is a joint translation of all three.

4.1.4. Dasasahasrika

Perfection of Wisdom in 10,000 lines.

4.1.5. Astasahasrika

The perfection of wisdom in 8000 lines. The oldest Prajna-paramita text.

4.1.6. Suvikrantivikrami-pariprccha (The Question of Suvikrantivikramin, or The Perfection of Wisdom in 2,500 lines)

4.1.7. Saptasatika-prajnaparamita sutra (The Perfection of Wisdom in 700 lines, or The Perfection of Wisdom as taught by Manjusri)

4.1.8. The Perfection of Wisdom in 500 lines

4.1.9. Vajracchedika (Diamond-Cutter sutra)

Also known as the Perfection of Wisdom in 300 lines, or the Diamond Sutra.

4.1.10. Hrdaya Sutra (Heart Sutra)

4.1.11. Adhyardhasatika (The Perfection of Wisdom in 150 lines)

4.1.12. The Perfection of Wisdom in 100 lines, also known as The Perfection of Wisdom as taught by Manjusri

4.1.13. Svalpaksara (The Perfection of Wisdom in a few syllables)

There is even a Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in One Letter. The letter is the (Sanskrit corresponding to) 'A' -- the negative prefix. It might be translated as the single word "Not".

4.2. Saddharma-pundarika (White Lotus of the True Dharma)

More well-known as "The Lotus Sutra".

4.3. Lalita-vistara

A biography of the Buddha.

4.4. Lankavatara (The Holy Entry of the True Dharma into Lanka)

Although Sangharakshita devotes an entire chapter to this Sutra, which

indicates its importance, I found it impossible to say anything useful about it in a sentence or two. This applies also to the Lotus Sutra and the Vimalakirti Nirdesa.

4.5. Guhyasamaja

Not a sutra, but a tantra -- see the section on the Vajrayana.

4.6. Vimalakirti-nirdesa (Exposition of Vimalakirti)

The principal statement of the Mahayana view of the true meaning of the Sangha, or spiritual community.

4.7. The Sukhavati (Happy Land) sutras

A group of three sutras.

4.7.1. Sukhavati-vyuha (Array of the Happy Land)

Also known as the Long Sutra.

4.7.2. Sukhavati-vyuha (Array of the Happy Land) (short version)

Also known as the Short Sutra. A smaller version of the preceding, 1/8th of the length.

4.7.3. Amitayur-dhyana Sutra (The Meditation on Amitayus)

Also known as the Meditation Sutra.

4.8. Other Pure Land sutras

4.8.1. Aksobhya-vyuha

Devoted to the praises of Abhirati, the Land of Exceeding Great Delight.

4.8.2. Karuna-pundarika (White Lotus of Compassion)

An account of the Buddha-field of the Buddha Padmottara.

4.8.3. Bhaisajyaguru Sutra

Concerns the Pure Land of the Buddha Vaiduryaprabha, or Azure Radiance.

4.8.4. Srimaladevi-simhananda (Queen Srimala's Asseveration (literally, "Lion-Roar"))

One of the principal canonical sources of the tathagata-garbha theory.

4.8.5. Manjusri-Buddhaksetra-guna-vyuha

Describes the "array of excellences" of the domain of the Bodhisattva Manjusri.

4.9. The Maharatnakuta Sutra (The Jewel-Heap Sutra)

Comprises a collection of sutras, including the above-mentioned large Sukhavati-vyuha, Aksobhya-vyuha, Srimaladevi-simhanada, Manjusri-Buddhaksetra-guna-vyuha, and Saptasatika-prajnaparamita sutra. Also includes:

4.9.1. Kasyapa-parivarta

A dialogue between the Buddha and Kasyapa expounding the qualities of a Bodhisattva and the doctrine of sunyata.

4.9.2. Vidyutprapta-pariprccha (Questions of the Bodhisattva Lightning Attainment)

4.9.3. Vimaladatta-pariprccha (Questions of [the Princess] Pure Giving)

4.9.4. Asokadatta-vyakarana (Sorrowless Giving's Prediction [to Buddhahood])

4.9.5. Susthitamati-pariprccha (Questions of [the god] Well-Abiding Mind)

Also known as "The Sutra of How to Kill with the Sword of Wisdom".

4.9.6. Surata-pariprccha (Questions of the Bodhisattva Surata)

Also known as the Surata Sutra.

4.9.7. Sumatidarika-pariprccha (Questions of the Girl Sumati)

4.9.8. Upali-pariprccha (Questions of the Arhat Upali)

4.9.9. Aksayamati-pariprccha (Questions of the Bodhisattva Aksayamati)

The Buddha describes how the bodhisattva practises the ten perfections (paramitas), and the ten stages of the bodhisattva path.

4.9.10. Bhadramayakara-pariprccha (Questions of Bhadra the Magician)

Concerning magic.

4.9.11. Bhadrapalasresthi-pariprccha (Questions of the Merchant Wise Protector)

The Buddha discusses the nature of consciousness.

4.9.12. Jnanottarabodhisattva-pariprccha (Questions of the Bodhisattva Supreme Knowledge)

The Buddha describes the various ways in which a Bodhisattva practises skilful means.

4.9.13. Rastrapala-pariprccha (Questions of Rastrapala)

Also known as the Rastrapala Sutra.

4.10. The Samadhi Sutras

4.10.1. Samadhiraja (King of Meditations)

Originally known as the Candrapradipa Sutra, and also known by many other variations of these titles.

4.10.2. Surangama-samadhi sutra (Sutra of the Heroic Advance)

4.10.3. Surangama Sutra

Known in Chinese as "The Buddha's Great Crown Sutra".

4.10.4. Vajra-samadhi Sutra (Diamond Meditation Sutra)

4.11. Avatamsaka Sutra (Flower Ornament Sutra)

Also known as the Buddhavatamsaka. More a family of sutras than a single sutra. Consists primarily of:

4.11.1. Dasabhumika Sutra

An account of the ten stages of the Bodhisattva path.

4.11.2. Gandavyuha

Has the form of a legendary narrative, concerning a youth seeking enlightenment who encounters a series of 53 spiritual advisers who instruct him in various aspects of the Bodhisattva ideal.

4.12. The Nirvana Sutras.

4.12.1. Maha-parinirvana Sutra

In the course of the Maha-parinirvana Sutra's one thousand pages (in English translation), very little happens. This sutra has some material in common with the similarly-named Mahaparinibbana Sutta, which is the sixteenth Sutta of the Digha Nikaya. It tells of the last days of the Buddha.

4.12.2. Suvarna-prabhasa Sutra (Sutra of Golden Light)

A medley of philosophy, devotion, legends, and spells.

5. The Tantras

The scriptures of the Vajrayana are known as Tantras. The Chinese canon includes a few tantras, but only the Tibetan Tripitaka has the tantras as a separate section. The Narthang edition of the Tibetan canon contains 22 volumes of tantras, as compared with 13 of Vinaya, 20 of Perfection of Wisdom texts, and 44 of other Mahayana sutras. There are also numerous other "uncollected" tantras which circulate among Tibetan Buddhists.

Only a few are publicly available in translation, the rest being kept secret among initiates. They cannot be usefully studied except by those who have received the appropriate initiation. Sangharakshita quotes Conze's stern words: "Either the author of a book [concerning Tantras] has not been initiated into a Tantra; then what he says is not first-hand knowledge. Or he has been initiated. Then, if he were to divulge the secrets to all and sundry just to make a profit or to increase his reputation, he has broken the trust placed in him and is morally so depraved as not to be worth listening to."

Those available in English translation include:

5.1. Hevajra Tantra

Of this the Buddha said: "If someone unworthy should see either book or painting [the iconic representation of its central Buddha-figure], one will fail to gain perfection either in this world or the next." Caveat lector.

5.2. Guhya-samaja Tantra (Esoteric Integration)

Mentioned above.

5.3. Kalachakra Tantra (Wheel of Time)

6. Brief comparison of the Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan canons

6.1. Pali

The Pali Tipitaka (Three Baskets), consisting of Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma Pitakas, is the oldest canon.

6.2. Chinese

In Chinese there is the San Tsang (Three Storehouses), which is a collection of translations and catalogues of translations. It consists of 1662 works in four classes: Ching (Sutra), Lu (Vinaya), Lun (Abhidharma), and Tsa-tsan (Miscellaneous). Ching consists of 1081 works: 541 Mahayana sutras, 240 Hinayana sutras, and 300 more Mahayana and Hinayana sutras. Lu contains 73 Vinaya texts. Lun contains 151 Abhidharma texts. Tsa-tsan contains 340 works, 146 translated from Sanskrit and 194 composed in Chinese.

6.3. Tibetan

The Tibetan Kangyur (Translated Word [of the Buddha]) consists of canonical works translated into Tibetan between the 7th and 11th centuries CE, mostly from the Sanskrit. The Gelugpa editions classify them into 6 groups: Dulwa (Vinaya), Sher-chin (Perfection of Wisdom), Phel-chen (Avatamsaka), Kontsig (Jewel-Heap), Do (Miscellaneous), and Gyu (Tantra).

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