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A PHILOLOGICAL APPROACH TO BUDDHISM

The Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai Lectures 1994

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ABBREVIATIONS

AMg	Ardha-Māgadhī
AO	Acta Orientalia
B.C.E.	Before Common Era
BHS	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit
BHSD	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary
BHSG	Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar
BSO(A)S	Bulletin of the School of Oriental (and African) Studies
BSR	Buddhist Studies Review
BUp	Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad
C.E.	Common Era
CP I–V	K.R. Norman. Collected Papers, Volumes I–IV (1990–94)
CPD	A Critical Pāli Dictionary, Copenhagen
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DEDR	T. Burrow & M.B. Emeneau, *Dravidian Etymological Dictionary* (Revised edition, 1984)
DPPN	G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* (1937–38)
EV I, II	K.R. Norman, *Elders' Verses* I (1969), II (1971)
GD I, II	K.R. Norman, *The Group of Discourses* I (1984), II (1992)
IIJ	Indo-Iranian Journal
IT	Indologica Taurinensia
JA	Journal Asiatique
JBuRS	Journal of the Burma Research Society
JOI(B)	Journal of the Oriental Institute (Baroda)
JPTS	Journal of the Pali Texts Society
JRAS	Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
m.c.	metri causa
MIA	Middle Indo-Aryan
MRI	*Minor Readings and Illustrator*

MW	M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (1899)
OUP	Oxford University Press
PDhp	Patna Dharmapada
PE	Pillar Edict
PED	The PTS's Pali-English Dictionary
Pkt	Prakrit
PTS	Pali Text Society
RE	Rock Edict
SBE	Sacred Books of the East
Skt	Sanskrit
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies (London)
SWTF	Goerg von Simson (ed.), *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte aus den Turfan-Funden* (1973–)
Überbl	O. von Hinüber, *Das ältere Mittelindisch im Überblick* (1986)
WZKSO	Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens

Abbreviations of the titles of Pāli texts are those adopted by the CPD.
Editions are those of the PTS, unless otherwise stated.

I
Buddhism and Philology

In the autumn of 1993 I attended a conference in America on the State of the Art in Buddhist Studies.[1] At that conference speaker after speaker said that they felt marginalised, in effect left out on the edges of their subject. In some cases this meant that their interest in Buddhism was what might be called "on the fringe", often combined with another discipline, e.g. social anthropology; in other cases it meant that in the departments of humanities in the various universities to which they belonged they were regarded with some sort of suspicion as being teachers of subjects which were not as important as other subjects, so that when money was allocated for teaching or library purposes they got the smaller share, or when posts were sacrificed in the interests of economy it was posts in their subjects which went.

Even those who might have been thought to be in the mainstream of Buddhist Studies said that they felt marginalised when they went as part of their field work to the country of their own specific interest only to find that they were regarded in some way as outsiders by the Buddhists in those countries.

My contribution to the conference was a paper on "Pāli studies in the West: present state and future tasks",[2] delivered in a session on Textual and Philological Studies. It was greeted with no great enthusiasm. People I met at various social functions thereafter during the course of the conference said "Ah, you are Mr Norman, aren't you? Your paper was about texts, wasn't it?" and hurriedly changed the subject, although one or two people did express interest, in a way which showed that they had never thought seriously about textual and philological studies before. Despite this reception, I felt in no way marginalised, as did the many participants who spoke about what I might describe as the "trendier aspects of Buddhism". This was strange because there were very few people at that conference who would claim to be philologists first and foremost, and to the best of my knowledge I was the only philologist there who disclaimed

[1] "Buddhist Studies: The State of the Art", University of California at Berkeley, October 28–31, 1993.
[2] Subsequently published in a slightly revised form in Religion (1994) 24, 165–72.

all knowledge of Buddhism. Nevertheless, I felt at the very core and heart of the subject—although this may be the equivalent of saying that I was the only one in step—because the branch of learning which I represented, i.e. philology, was to my mind the very basis of all the work which my fellow participants in the conference were doing, although my specific area of philology, i.e. early Indo-Aryan dialects, bore no relationship to the geographical areas of most of the participants' interests.

It is, in fact, not surprising if some scholars in the field of Buddhist Studies feel marginalised, because to some extent they have marginalised themselves. There is a tendency in modern scholarship to look always for the new—scholars entering the field are not content to tread the paths well-worn by their predecessors, even when it is clear that the work of their predecessors needs reworking. The cry is to find something new, something which has not been done before. I am confronted with this tendency all the time. Prospective research students visit me or write to me and ask what they can do for their doctoral thesis in the field of Pāli studies. I say: "What has not been done needs to be done, and what has been done needs to be done again". Of these the second is the more important, because, by and large, the most important Pāli texts were published first, when little was known about the Pāli language—there were only inadequate dictionaries and grammars, and only a few manuscripts had come to Europe. Now more and better manuscripts are available, and we have superior grammatical and lexicographical aids, and so vast improvements can be made in editions and in translations based on those editions, and in books on Buddhism based on those translations. Unfortunately, the enquirers all want to do something new, so the study of the fundamentals is abandoned while they go after trendy trivia which they hope will have an earthshaking effect upon the world of Pāli and Buddhist studies when the result of their research appears.

Why did I feel the way I did at that conference? I will answer that question with another question.

If you hear about a religion for the first time, and want to know about it, how do you set about gaining the knowledge you desire? You can of course read a book about it, but if you are not entirely satisfied with the answers you get, and read another book on the subject, you may well find that although the authors seem to be talking about the same thing they are not necessarily saying identical things about it.

An alternative method is to question a follower of the religion, but you will almost certainly find that precisely the same inconsistency in the views expressed appears, if you go on to question another follower. Sooner or later any serious investigator into a religion must examine the texts which the followers of the religion say they are taking as the basis for their religion. He must see how far

what the texts say and what the followers do coincide, i.e. he must measure the difference between precept and practice.

If, by chance, the religion is one which still maintains an oral tradition, that is to say its “sacred” texts have not yet been written down, then problems may arise from the fact that the modern adherents of the religion are precisely those who are the authorities for their religious beliefs, and what they say and do is their religion, i.e. the practice is the precept, or the precept is the practice.

Such a situation presents difficulties of its own, but such difficulties are mercifully absent from the study of Buddhism. Here we are faced with a situation where the founder of the religion lived approximately 2½ millennia ago. There is a large body of material in an assortment of languages which is ascribed to the founder and much of it has been edited and published in a form which makes it easily accessible and available to investigators. Those wishing to know about Buddhism can consult these ancient sources, and there is a battery of ancillary material—dictionaries, grammars, translations, etc.—which enables them to do so.

There is, of course, the problem that if we set out to understand what the earliest texts say, i.e. those ascribed to the Buddha himself, or his followers during his lifetime, we have to consider the fact that the language which we find in such texts is not necessarily, and almost certainly is not, the language of the Buddha himself, i.e. the language has been changed both synchronically—it has been translated or transformed into other languages as the need arose, perhaps as Buddhism spread into neighbouring areas—and also diachronically, i.e. as the language of the readers or recensionists developed in the course of time, this had an effect upon the language of the texts. It is also possible and indeed probable that changes took place in what the Buddha is reported to have said and done, i.e. the tradition changed, unconsciously, the Buddha’s views because, as certain words fell out of use and were no longer understood, they were “brought up to date” and made more intelligible by having an interpretation inserted into the texts in their place. The account of what the Buddha said or did might also be changed consciously by having interpolations inserted, for various reasons. Sometimes it is because a passage seemed appropriate to the context. For example, when in the Mahāparinibbānasutta the Buddha has given eight reasons for an earthquake occurring, a number of other sets of eight phenomena are added. Sometimes an interpolation occurs because a person or a city or a sect wished to have some dogma or action authenticated, and a reference to the Buddha doing something or saying something was inserted into the text to give the authentication they desired.

Much of our knowledge about Buddhism, at least in the early days, came in a rather haphazard way, as the result of reports by travellers, envoys, etc. One such

envoy was Simon de La Loubère, who in 1687–88 went to Siam as an envoy of the king of France (King Louis), and on his return wrote a book about the Kingdom of Siam, which was published in France in 1691. Two years later an English translation was published in England.[3] La Loubère gave a fascinating account of many aspects of Siam and Siamese culture, and he also included an account of the Siamese religion—Buddhism—and the sacred language of the Siamese. He noted the differences between that language, which he called Balie, and the Siamese language, and noted, correctly, the relationship between the former and Sanskrit. He also gave French translations of a few Buddhist texts.

It was until quite recently believed that he probably made these translations from Siamese translations from Pāli, but it has now been shown that, before La Loubère went to Siam, French Christian missionaries were already active in that country, and had compiled dictionaries of Siamese and Pāli, now unfortunately lost, and even a Pāli preface and postface to a translation of St Luke's Gospel into Thai, which still survives in France in the archives of the Missions étrangères.[4] It is therefore possible or even probable that La Loubère gained his knowledge from those missionaries, rather than from the man in the street. We may assume that those missionaries learned Pāli and studied texts in Pāli in order that they might better confute their Buddhist opponents and convert them to Christianity.

Such was, indeed, the purpose of British missionaries in Sri Lanka a little more than a century later. Men like Benjamin Clough studied Pāli and wrote grammars, together with lengthy word lists based upon indigenous dictionaries.[5] If the original intention was to learn the language so that the religion it supported might be demolished, we may suspect that familiarity begat not contempt but affection, and translations of the Pāli texts, e.g. the Dhammapada, which those missionaries produced did more to make English readers want to learn more about Buddhism than to convert the followers of Buddhism to Christianity. In fact the impact of Buddhism upon nineteenth-century Britain reveals a very varied response, well depicted recently by Philip Almond.[6]

It is possible, however, that such study of Pāli would have been as ineffectual outside missionary circles as the French endeavours—although they sent manuscripts back to France there is little evidence of their being studied—had it not been for the sudden rise of a new field of study: comparative philology. In the few years since Sir William Jones' well-known statement about the relationship of Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, etc., the subject had made rapid progress.

[3] La Loubère, 1693.
[4] See Pruitt, 1987, 121–31.
[5] Clough, 1824.
[6] Almond, 1988.

Although Jones was not the first to notice such relationships, his pronouncement seems to have attracted more attention than the suggestions of others. The need to study Sanskrit and to obtain manuscripts of Sanskrit works led to the Danish philologist Rasmus Rask going to India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) c. 1820 and bringing back a fine collection of manuscripts, which is now housed in the Royal Library in Copenhagen.

Other manuscripts of Buddhist texts came to the West in different ways. Brian Hodgson was the British resident in Kathmandu in the 1830's and began to send Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts to Europe. These formed the basis of Burnouf's studies of Buddhism. After the conquest of Upper Burma in 1885 a large part of the royal library at Mandalay came to England. It is unfortunate that the complete holdings of the library were not sent, for those manuscripts which did not reach England at that time have been lost. Daniel Wright was the brother of William Wright, the Professor of Arabic at Cambridge. When he became surgeon to the British Residency in Kathmandu in the 1870's, he was asked to obtain copies of Sanskrit manuscripts for Cowell, the Professor of Sanskrit at Cambridge at the time. Wright found it cheaper and easier to buy originals, which are now in the University Library at Cambridge.[7] Once professors began to be appointed in European universities to teach Sanskrit and Pāli, the academic study of Buddhist Sanskrit and Pāli manuscripts made great progress, and Spiegel and Fausbøll had published Pāli texts by 1855.

These editions and studies were, inevitably, made from the very limited number of manuscripts which were available to the editors, and were restricted to the tradition of the country in which they were procured, in the case of Rask and Clough to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Only gradually did it become possible to make use of materials from other traditions, and this produced surprises. Although Fausbøll had been able to make use of Burmese manuscripts for his edition of the Jātakatthavaṇṇanā, for the most part he took the readings of his Sinhalese manuscripts for the text, and gave the readings of the Burmese manuscripts in the footnotes. When, however, he came to Volume VI, the Mahānipāta, he reported[8] that he had not taken full notice of his Burmese manuscript B^d, as the text for the Mahānipāta in that manuscript had been very much enlarged throughout, so as to make it, in many places, very different from the Sinhalese tradition. He reported that the aim of the Burmese redactor seemed to have been to make the tale more lucid and intelligible, but the consequential difference was in many particulars so great that he expressed the hope that some scholar would give a separate edition of the Mahānipāta according to the

[7] Bendall, 1883.
[8] Preliminary remarks 7.

Burmese redaction. Fausbøll had been forced to realise the need for comparative studies, on a philological basis, of parallel versions of Buddhist texts.

I have entitled this lecture “Buddhism and philology”. I might just have well have entitled it “Buddhism and the philologist”, since I want to set out the pattern which I, as a philologist, shall follow in these lectures. The course is in effect an *apologia pro vita mea*, explaining my encounter with Buddhism through the medium of philology, and at the same time setting out some of the things which philology has told us about the Buddha and various aspects of Buddhism: its origin, the way in which the texts were transmitted, first orally and then in a written form, the way in which a selection of texts was given canonical status, and how there was need for commentaries upon them. In my last lecture I shall suggest what further contributions philology can be expected to make to the promotion of Buddhism by giving a better understanding of the texts which lie at the heart of Buddhist Studies.

I personally came to this body of material, or at least to a portion of it, not from my desire to investigate Buddhism but from purely philological considerations. I was trained as a classicist and studied classical philology, in the form which was current in my student days, i.e. the investigation of the relationship between Latin, Greek and Sanskrit in particular, and between other Indo-European languages in general. I went on to study Sanskrit and the dialects associated with Sanskrit—the Prakrits—and was appointed to teach the Prakrits, or Middle Indo-Aryan, as they are sometimes called, lying as they do between Old Indo-Aryan, i.e. Sanskrit, and New Indo-Aryan, i.e. the modern Indo-Aryan languages spoken mainly in North India.

I was interested in the relationship between the various Middle Indo-Aryan dialects, and began to study them comparatively, trying to use forms in one dialect to shed light on forms in other dialects. Because Middle Indo-Aryan includes Pāli, the language of the Theravādin canon and the commentaries upon it, as a matter of course I included the study of Pāli in my investigations. My interest in Pāli led to my being invited to join the Council of the Pali Text Society and I was persuaded to help with the continuation of the *Pāḷi Tipiṭakaṃ Concordance*, which had come to a standstill after the death of its first editor, E.M. Hare. This was essentially a philological undertaking, in that it consisted of presenting for publication the contents of the Pāli canon, word by word, with the material analysed and set out by case forms, tenses, etc., as was appropriate. The words were given a meaning merely for reference purposes, but no interpretation of meaning, or discussion from a doctrinal point of view was involved.

That work in turn led to an invitation to become involved with *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*, based in Copenhagen. That involvement led eventually to becoming Editor-in-Chief of that project, until the portion for which I had assumed

responsibility (to the end of Volume II, i.e. to the end of the vowels) was completed at the end of 1990, some 66 years after the first fascicle of the dictionary was published by Helmer Smith and Dines Andersen in 1924. That work for *A Critical Pāli Dictionary* was also primarily a philological undertaking, since it involved an analysis of the usage of each word listed and the assignment of meanings for each usage, but not, for the most part, a discussion of the doctrinal importance of each word and the part it played in Buddhism.

What do I mean by saying that in *A Critical Pāli Dictionary* there was no discussion of the doctrinal importance of each word and the part it played in Buddhism? I mean that it is sufficient in a dictionary to state, for example, that *jhāna*; means "meditation", without any discussion of how one meditates, or the importance of meditation to a Buddhist or to Buddhism. As a result of my activities in this field, extending over nearly twenty years, I am in the habit of saying that I know nothing about Buddhism, but I do know a little about some of the words used in Buddhism and some of the languages of Buddhism. I regard one of my purposes in life as being an adviser to those who know a lot about Buddhism, but not a great deal about the languages of Buddhism. From time to time I receive enquiries from those wishing to write about aspects of Buddhism. They tell me what they think a particular passage means, and how they propose to incorporate their interpretation into their discussion or description of Buddhism, and they ask me whether I think that their proposal is possible, philologically speaking.

The difference between a student of Buddhism and a student of Buddhist philology is very considerable. It may be possible for someone to be an expert in all types of Buddhism. Since the age of the polymaths is not quite dead, it may be possible for someone to be an expert in all types and aspects of Buddhist philology. I do not know such a person, although I have been fortunate enough in my life to meet one or two scholars who come close to it.

But I am not one of them. Such expertise as I have is confined to the dialects of Middle Indo-Aryan used primarily in North India between about 500 BC and 1000 AD, but taken from there south to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and north to Chinese Turkestan. My knowledge of Buddhist philology is therefore restricted to Indian Buddhism, and especially to those schools of Buddhism which made use of a dialect of Middle Indo-Aryan for their texts, or used a variety of Sanskrit which was greatly influenced by Middle Indo-Aryan. Nevertheless, much of what I shall say applies to the way in which we should approach the texts which form the basis for the study of any aspect of Buddhism.

It is time to say what I mean by a philological approach to Buddhism. By that I mean approaching Buddhism not merely by language—we all do that in one

way or another—but by means of what we can learn from language. Not “what does it mean?” but “why or how does it mean it?”. Let me give an illustration. We might, in a philosophical passage, have a sentence which says “X arises because of Y”. We can give tentative translations of both X and Y, and the task of interpreters is to refine these translations until they have arrived at what they think the author of the statement meant when the statement was made. There is no need for philology in my sense of the word there. Philology in my sense is required at an earlier stage. What is the structure of the sentence? Are we correct in thinking that it actually says “X arises because of Y”? In many cases, perhaps most cases, it will be clear that the structure of the sentence is sound as it stands, and there is no need for the philologist to consider the matter further.

Let me give you another illustration from my own experience. When I was first appointed as a Lecturer in Middle Indo-Aryan Studies, I found in my very first term that there was an option available called “Sanskrit and Indo-Aryan philology” and I was responsible for teaching the Middle Indo-Aryan part of the latter, centring the course around the Aśokan inscriptions. More than that, I discovered that there were, in my very first term, candidates taking this option. And so at high speed I set about producing a course of lectures on Middle Indo-Aryan philology beginning with the Aśokan inscriptions. I consulted all the editions of the inscriptions available to me, read all the secondary literature on which I could lay my hands, and I produced a course of lectures during which I dealt, in my opinion, in a satisfactory way with all the many problems in those inscriptions. I showed those attending my lectures how the inscriptions should be translated and interpreted. I was so pleased with my achievement that I inserted a course of lectures on the Aśokan inscriptions into my own standard teaching. And so, year after year, I lectured on the Aśokan inscriptions, using those same notes I wrote so long ago. Well, not quite the same notes, because as my understanding of Middle Indo-Aryan philology increased, and as my appreciation of the philological approach to these matters grew, I realised that I had tried to say what the words meant, but not how or why they meant it. As I came to grapple with the question of how they meant it, I discovered that, in many cases, I did not know how the inscriptions could possibly mean what I had said they meant, and as a result of not knowing how they could mean what I had said, I had great doubts about what they did actually mean. And so my study of the Aśokan inscriptions led to a situation where every year I understood less and less. To paraphrase the words of another honest seeker after truth: the only thing I know about the Aśokan inscriptions is that I know nothing about the Aśokan inscriptions.

I can almost hear some of you thinking, “If that is what philology does for you then thank goodness I am not a philologist”. And of course there is a great deal to be said for that view. If you are setting out to explain and translate a text then

it is very frustrating, even humiliating, to have to confess that you do not understand how the words can possibly mean what you would like them to mean. And consequently many translators do not confess this, possibly because they do not wish to show their ignorance, or possibly because they do not realise their ignorance. Instead they translate by intuition. If you examine many translations of Buddhist texts the impression you will gain is that the translator has looked at the words, has perhaps looked them up in the dictionary and has ascertained meanings for them, and then has used his intuition to put those words together to reveal the meaning of the *Buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha. Sometimes intuition leads a translator to the right result, and sometimes not. Many translators have worked on the basis of intuition, and for the most part it has got them along very well. Often self-taught, or taught by native scholars whose standard of proficiency in teaching was not necessarily high, they have been forced, especially in the days before such aids as good dictionaries and grammars in a European language existed, to translate by the "intuitive" method, whereby they examined the context and deduced from that what the meaning must be. As has been said by Professor O'Flaherty in the context of Ṛgvedic studies, where the situation is very similar: "Many of our most valuable insights into otherwise obscure terms have come from scholars who have seen what the meaning must be from [the] context, from an understanding of Vedic thought processes".[9] The wonder is not that these intuitive translators were sometimes incorrect, but that they were correct so often.

In what I propose to say in these lectures I will be more specific and restrict myself to a field where I think, I hope correctly, that I know a little about the subject I am discussing, i.e. the fields of Sanskrit and Pāli. In those fields, the habit of translating by intuition—I could be unkind and say "by guesswork"—has been in the past, and to some extent still is, the standard way of proceeding when faced with a difficult passage. When in doubt, make a guess. This is all very well, if the guesswork leads to the right answer, but guessing does not seem to me to be the right basis for the study of anything, whether it is religion or social conditions, political affairs or history.

The more we study the work done by our predecessors the more, I am sorry to have to say, we find that our idols have feet of clay. Thomas William Rhys Davids founded the Pali Text Society in 1881, and by his editions and translations of Pāli texts and by his contribution to Pāli lexicography he probably did more than anyone else to promote Pāli studies in Europe. My attention was drawn recently to a passage in the Dīgha-nikāya, or more precisely, to Rhys Davids' translation of the passage. It comes in the Āṭānāṭiya-suttanta, and outlines the sort of treatment which might be meted out to any non-human

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[9] O'Flaherty, 1975, 173–75 (173).

creature who approached someone who knows the Āṭānāṭa spell. One sentence in that passage[10] consists of four words or phrases; a phrase meaning "empty bowl", a word meaning "head", a particle which has several meanings of which the concessive "although" and the emphatic "indeed" are perhaps the most common, and a verb meaning "to bend, to turn, to turn upside down". Rhys Davids took these words and translated them as "They would bend down his head like an empty bowl",[11] without perhaps reflecting on whether there was any significant difference between a head being turned down like an empty bowl and being turned down like a full one. In fact, the translation is wrong. Rhys Davids was translating by intuition, or as we might say, he was guessing the meaning. The words for "empty bowl" and "head" are not in the same case, which is what his translation would require, and the particle does not mean "like". The sentence means "they would turn an empty bowl upside down on his head"—the word for head is in the locative case, and the particle is used here to give emphasis to the word which precedes it. The emphasis is upon the fact that the bowl was *empty*. The bowl had to be empty, so that it would slip down on to the recipient's shoulders. The tormentors then hit the bowl with an iron bar, as the commentary explains,[12] and the resultant reverberations would presumably do the victim's eardrums and brain no good at all.

The method of translation which leads to this type of misunderstanding of the text is very similar to the way in which some young children read. They learn the value of some of the letters, and the context in which they find the letters on the page—they are perhaps accompanied by a picture illustrating the story—enables them to work out what is going on, and so to guess appropriate words which include the letters they can recognise and will also fit the story. I am reminded of a child, who at the age of nine was diagnosed as being dyslexic, with a specific reading problem. He had been "reading" in this way, and his problem had only come to light because he had reached the stage in arithmetic where he no longer had to add 193 to 476, but was beginning to get questions which had to be read, e.g. of the "if two men can dig a hole five feet deep in two days how long would it take ten men to dig to Australia"-variety—the sort of question which you cannot guess from the context. That is exactly parallel to the intuitive translator. He knows the meaning of some, or even all, of the words, and he deduces from the context the way in which the words should be construed. Once the context gives no help for his intuition, he is reduced to blind guesswork, and he may not always guess correctly.

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[10] *api ssu naṃ mārisa amanussā rittam pi pattaṃ sīse nikkujjeyyuṃ*, D III 203, 21–22.

[11] T.W. & C.A.F. Rhys Davids, 1921,195.

[12] *rittam pi pattan ti, bhikkhūnaṃ patta-sadisam eva loha-pattaṃ hoti. taṃ sīse nikkujjitaṃ yāva gala-vāṭakā bhassati. atha naṃ majjhe ayo-khīleana ākoṭenti*, Sv 968, 37–39.

You may say that the example I have quoted from Rhys Davids is a trivial matter, and think that a trifling mistranslation of this nature is of no consequence. I cannot agree with that view. The important point about this matter is that the Pāli words are *incapable* of bearing the translation which Rhys Davids assigned to them—a translation which, I may add, was copied, perhaps unthinkingly, by a more recent translator.[13] The translator gives the impression of having made no attempt to see how the words could have the meaning he gave them, or to put it more bluntly, he showed himself unable to construe the words in a simple Pāli sentence. If he adopted such a method of translating in a simple sentence where we can see his error, how can we trust him in a more important context, where the language may be more complicated, and every atom of philological expertise is needed to unravel the meaning intended by the author of the text?

The situation can be seen very clearly from the way in which some people make translations. Hardly a year goes by without a new translation of the Dhammapada appearing. There are now probably forty or more available in English alone. And yet, if one compares a new translation with its predecessors, one notes that for the most part the new translation differs only in very minor details: the order of words, perhaps, or the choice of translations adopted to serve for specific technical or semi-technical terms. Anyone reading a translation of a Pāli text is dissatisfied with the translations given for words like *dhamma*, *kamma*, *nibbāna*, *āsava*, etc., and, sooner or later, is fired with the desire to make a new translation giving what they think is the "proper" or "correct" translation of these terms. Having done this, translators believe that they have made a better translation, without giving any thought to the question of whether they have gained a better understanding of the meaning of the phrase or the sentence as a whole. It has been pointed out[14] that quite reputable translators have been known to take over translations from their predecessors, forgetful or perhaps ignorant of the fact that the text they print with their translation follows a different reading, and cannot possibly mean what they say it does.

At this point, I should make it clear that the fact that we do not see a philological problem in a text does not mean that there is no such problem, because it sometimes happens that those unversed in philology do not understand that the language they are dealing with, which perhaps they think they understand very well, does not and perhaps cannot have the meaning which they ascribe to it. It is, for example, not always understood by non-specialists that an early Pāli canonical *sutta* is itself a translation, and forms which were left untranslated when the Pāli recension was made from some earlier version can

[13] Walshe, 1987, 477.
[14] Brough, 1962, 195 (ad GDhp 75).

sometimes be identified.[15] Although it may be possible to translate such Pāli texts into English, we must, if our aim is to find out how the words can have the meaning we assign to them, first try to find out what the author actually said, i.e. we must "back-translate" the text into a form of language as close as possible to that which we believe was spoken at the time of the Buddha.[16]

This involves making use of all the resources of philological and literary criticism to establish the original form of the text which we wish to translate, which requires a knowledge of the languages of North India and Ceylon at the time of the Buddha and the centuries immediately after his death. This in turn necessitates expertise not only in the Middle Indo-Aryan languages, of which Pāli is one, but also in Classical Sanskrit, Buddhist Sanskrit and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, since much of the language of early Buddhist texts is related to or taken over from Sanskrit, while parallel versions of many Pāli canonical texts exist in Buddhist Sanskrit or Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit.

A very good example of a portion of text which seems to have no philological problems is something which is fundamental to Buddhist belief—the so-called four noble truths. Everyone who knows anything about Buddhism knows these four truths well. The shortest form of them that I know is that which says simply: "Four noble truths: pain, arising, cessation, path".[17] This is, of course, abbreviation to the point of error. The first noble truth is not pain, but the realisation that "this (i.e. the whole of existence) is pain". I have seen "this suffering is a noble truth", "this origin of suffering is a noble truth", and "this cessation of suffering is a noble truth" as translations of the first three noble truths,[18] in complete disregard of the grammar and syntax. It is only when the philologist examines the problem, analyses the relationship of the words, compares other versions of the noble truths found in Sanskrit, and establishes the syntax of each phrase that the correct translations "The noble truth that 'this is suffering'", "The noble truth that 'this is the cause of suffering'", etc., become possible.[19]

Once the structure of the syntax and grammar of the four noble truths has been understood, then it becomes possible to give consideration to a number of other sentences and phrases found in Buddhist texts (and other Indian texts as well), which present comparable grammatical and syntactical problems for the

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[15] e.g. in Th 1279 (*sacce atthe ca dhamme ca āhu santo patiṭṭhitā*), *sacce* is probably the locative case, while *atthe* and *dhamme* are in the nominative case. See Norman, EV I, 292.
[16] The latest views on this subject can be seen in Bechert, 1980.
[17] Th 492.
[18] Kloppenborg, 1973, 4.
[19] See Norman, 1982, 377–91 (= *CP* II, 210–23).

philologist, but not always for other people, and to suggest explanations for them which enable satisfactory translations to be given.[20]

What else can philology tell us about concepts which are not entirely unimportant in the field of Buddhist Studies? The word *nibbāna* (or *nirvāṇa* in its Sanskrit form) is so common in discussions of Buddhism that it is very often not translated, but left in its Pāli or Sanskrit form. It is, however, possible for the philologist to take the word and suggest an explanation for the fact that while it appears to come from a root meaning "to blow", the past participle which is used in conjunction with it comes from a root of entirely different meaning although of rather similar appearance.[21] The connection between them, when explained in this way, enables us to understand the word play which is found with both the noun and the past participle.

We can also explain the structure of the adjectives which are commonly used to describe *nirvāṇa* and thus enable better (and more accurate) translations to be given, so that we can better understand the reluctance of the Buddha to attempt to describe the nature of *nirvāṇa*, or of someone who has gained *nirvāṇa*.

For example, one of the epithets used of *nirvāṇa*; is *amṛta* (in Sanskrit), or *amata*; (in Pāli) "not dead", or "deathless", or "undying", or "immortal", and we therefore sometimes find the compound *amatapada*; "the *amata* place" or "the place of *amata*" being translated as "the immortal place" or "the place of immortality". The former translation raises the difficulty of conceiving of a place that does not die, as opposed to a place which is mortal and does die. The latter translation implies that those who have gained *nibbāna* live for ever, which, as has been pointed out,[22] seems to be incompatible with the rest of the teachings of the Buddha, and must therefore be an untenable view in Buddhism. It is, however, possible to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the word, if we try to find out how it gets its various meanings. We can, in the light of the distinctions we can draw between the meanings of *amṛta*, better understand the situation with regard to *nirvāṇa*: it is *ajāta*; "without birth" and consequently it is *amṛta* "without death".[23] That is to say: no one is born there, and therefore no one dies there.

To give another example. The concept of the *pratyeka-buddha*; is well known as the middle element in the triad: *buddhas*, *pratyeka-buddha*s; and *śrāvakas*, and the usual translation "a buddha (awakened) for himself" satisfies most people. This usage of the word *pratyeka*; (*pacceka*; in its Pāli form) is, however, unusual, and it is not at all clear how it could have the meaning given to it. When

[20] See Norman, 1991C, 3–9 (= *CP* IV, 218–25).
[21] See Norman, 1994, 209–24.
[22] Kalupahana, 1986, 161 (ad Dhp 21).
[23] See Norman, 1991D, 1–11 (7) (= *CP* IV, 251–63 [261]).

consideration is given to the fact that the concept of a similar type of Buddha is also found in Jainism, but there, in Jain Prakrit, the name is *patteya-buddha*, then it becomes possible for the philologist to suggest an etymology for the word which can explain both the form in Prakrit and the form in Pāli—explaining the form in Sanskrit presents no difficulty since it is merely a Sanskritisation of the Pāli form or something similar to it—and on the basis of that explanation to provide a more satisfactory translation.[24]

The basic work of philology is, of course, going on all the time when we consider Buddhist texts. We have to ask ourselves "do we know what each word is" before we can ask "what does each word mean", and start to think about translating the words or interpreting them. In many cases we can see that the understanding of the structure of a particular word had already been lost before the commentaries were written, because it is clear that the commentators do not understand its structure. In this connection, the discovery of Sanskrit and Prakrit Buddhist texts in Chinese Turkestan, Afghanistan and India in the course of the last hundred years has provided an invaluable tool for the philologist. Quite often these new discoveries date back to a time before the confusion or corruption or whatever it was came into being; sometimes they present a corruption of a different nature which enables us to suggest a solution to the problem. A close comparative study of (say) the Pāli Dhammapada, the Gāndhārī Dharmapada, the so-called Patna Dharmapada and the Sanskrit Udānavarga is very rewarding, since it enables us to use each and every version as a control upon the others, and we can quite often identify the corruption—even when, in the absence of parallel passages, no corruption was hitherto suspected—and, more important, suggest how it came into being.

Such philological studies have enabled us to identify nominal and verbal forms which were no longer understood, to identify verbal roots which are not otherwise attested in the language,[25] and with our newly-found knowledge to correct corrupt readings and restore something which we hope might approximate to the original reading, and make better and more accurate translations as a result. It is very regrettable that many of these philological discoveries are still unknown to, or are perhaps ignored by, some translators, who consequently may well make mistakes in their translations, and in their understanding of Buddhism based upon those translations.

For example, philological investigation has shown that in Pāli the ending which is identical in form with the accusative singular can sometimes, although very rarely, stand also for the accusative plural or the ablative singular.[26]

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[24] See Norman, 1983A, 92–106 (= *CP* II, 233–49).
[25] See Norman, 1989B, 29–53 (52, note 139) (= *CP*IV, 92–123 [122, note1]).
[26] See Lüders, 1954, §§ 188–219.

Nevertheless, some recent translations reveal no knowledge of an accusative plural with this ending (in *-aṃ*) in Pāli. There is in the section about the wise man (Paṇḍita-vagga) in the Dhammapada a verse[27] about abandoning the *kaṇham dhammaṃ*, literally "the black dhamma", and cultivating the *sukkaṃ*; [*dhammaṃ*], "the white (or bright) *dhamma*". Some translators take these forms as singular, and translate "Having forsaken a shadowy *dhamma*, the wise one would cultivate the bright",[28] or "A wise man should develop a bright character abandoning the shady one",[29] or "Let the wise man leave the way of darkness and follow the way of light",[30] whereas the commentary on the verse where it occurs elsewhere in Pāli,[31] makes it clear that it is referring to the very common categorisation of *dhammas*, in the plural, as *akusala* and *kusala*. I mentioned just now parallel versions of the Pāli Dhp, and if we examine the forms of the verse which occur in them,[32] we find that they have plural forms.

Such translations seem even more remarkable when translators reveal knowledge of parallel versions, but do not take advantage of their knowledge. There is in the Flower Section of the Dhammapada[33] verse which describes how a bee takes nectar from a flower and then flies away without harming it. The word for "flower" (*pupphaṃ*) appears to be in the accusative case, and this has caused problems for some translators, who find it difficult to fit an accusative form into the sentence. Recent translators[34] state that "from a flower" would be a better translation for *pupphaṃ*, and they point to the existence of the ablative forms *puṣpā*; and *puṣpād*; in the parallel texts, but do not follow their own suggestion in their translation. They do not say that *pupphaṃ* might actually be an ablative, and they show no hint of any knowledge of the existence in Pāli of an ablative singular in *-aṃ*.

Another way in which philology, the study of why words mean what they do, can be helpful is that we sometimes find that those who made the first English translations of Buddhist texts gave a particular meaning to a word which we have for the most part followed without change ever since. When we come to look at the words themselves we find that the meanings which we have accepted for so long are very often not the only possible meanings but in some cases not

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[27] *kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ vippahāya, sukkaṃ bhāvetha paṇḍito*, Dhp 87ab.
[28] Carter & Palihawadana, 1987, 170.
[29] Kalupahana, 1986, 121.
[30] Rādhakrishnan, 1950, 87.
[31] *kaṇhan ti, akusala-dhammaṃ. sukkan ti, kusala-dhammaṃ*, Spk III 132,20–21 (ad S V 24, 21).
[32] *kinhe dhamme viprahāya śukre bhāvetha paṇḍitā, Patna Dharmapada 263ba; kṛṣṇāṃ dharmāṃ viprahāya śuklāṃ bhāvayata bhikṣavaḥ*, Udāna-v 16.14ab.
[33] *yathāpi bhamaro pupphaṃ vaṇṇagandhaṃ aheṭhayaṃ paleti rasam ādāya*, Dhp 49abc.
[34] Carter & Palihawadana, 1987, 443, note 14.

even the most likely meanings. Take for example, the phrase "noble truth", which I mentioned a few minutes ago. It has become a commonplace to talk about the four noble truths, and this is a perfectly acceptable translation of the compound *ariya-sacca*: *ariya* means noble and *sacca* means truth, so *ariya-sacca* means noble truth. This translation is so common and so fixed in our minds, that it seems almost like blasphemy to have to point out that not only is this not the only possible translation, but it is in fact the least likely of all the possibilities. If we look at the commentators we find that they knew this very well. They point out that the compound can have a number of meanings. It can mean "truth of the noble one", "truth of the noble ones", "truth for a noble one", i.e. truth that will make one noble, as well as the translation "noble truth" so familiar to us.[35] This last possibility, however, they put at the bottom of the list of possibilities, if they mention it at all. My own feeling is that it is very likely that "the truth of the noble one (the Buddha)" is the correct translation, although we must never lose sight of the fact that in Indian literature multiple meanings are very often intended, so that it is not always possible to say that there is a single correct meaning.

To give another example: we all know at least the title of the text called Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, and following Burnouf we have always translated this as "the lotus of the good law". Once again this is not the only possibility. It could, for example, be "the good lotus of the law", or "the lotus of the law of the good one", or " … of the good ones". Since in fact we find that there is in the Dhammapada a verse talking about the good teaching the *dhamma*; to the good,[36] we could very reasonably translate the title as "The lotus of the doctrine of the good one or of the good ones", i.e. the Buddha or the Buddhas.

Another place where the early translators were probably wrong is in the translation which is given of the title of the text called the Mahāparinibbānasutta. Rhys Davids translated this as "The book of the great decease". This is possible, although we might wonder what would constitute a small decease. We can, in fact, be fairly certain that the translation is not correct. We find quite commonly in the Pāli canon pairs of *suttas*, one called *mahā*; "great" and the other *cūḷa*; "small", so that we might have a large *sutta* on a particular subject and a small *sutta* on the same subject. And we may assume that originally the small version was in fact shorter than the large one, and represented a contraction of the large, or alternatively the large represented an expansion of the small version. It does not, however, in the forms in which we have them, always work like that. Sometimes the small *sutta* is larger than the large *sutta*, and we must assume that further contraction or expansion has taken place since the *suttas* received their

[35] See Norman, 1990B, 1–13 (= *CP* IV, 170–74).
[36] *satañ ca dhammo na jaraṃ upeti, santo have sabbhi pavedayanti*, Dhp 151cd.

names. It is probable, therefore, that a more correct translation of Mahāparinibbānasutta is "the large text about the decease", and it is just chance that we do not find a Cūḷa-parinibbānasutta in the Pāli canon.[37] I may note in passing that Rhys Davids' translation of the title is all the more strange because the preceding *sutta* in the Dīgha-nikāya is the Mahānidānasuttanta, which he correctly translates as "The great discourse on causation".

Those who mistranslate in such a way are in good company, because there is another blatant, if I may be permitted to use the word, mistranslation of a text title of exactly the same type, namely that adopted for the Mahāprajñāpāramitāsūtra, which that great Belgian scholar Étienne Lamotte translated as "Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse" instead of "Le grand traité de la vertu de sagesse". To do Lamotte justice we must remember that he himself realised his mistake some time before his death, but at a time when it was not deemed feasible to change the title.

Another important point which philology has been able to clarify is the translation of the noun *parinibbāna*; which Rhys Davids translated as "decease" in the title of the *sutta* I have just mentioned. Because that *sutta* deals with the *nibbāna* which the Buddha obtained at death, *parinibbāna* is often translated as "final *nibbāna*", reserving the simple "*nibbāna*" for the experience which the Buddha had at the time of his awakening. Because of the use of the word *parinibbāna* in connection with the Buddha's death, it is assumed by some that it can only be used of *nibbāna* at death. This interpretation is, however, based upon a misunderstanding of the significance of the prefix *pari-*. It can be shown very easily that it does not imply "final", and *parinibbāna*, at least in its original usage, cannot mean "final *nibbāna*" because there are many references in the texts to living beings who are described as *parinibbuta* "having gained *parinibbāna*".[38]

Another example of an on-going mistranslation is the word *kusala*, which I mentioned a few minutes ago. This is usually translated "skilled" or "skilful". The word certainly has this meaning, but in Sanskrit it is the secondary meaning, the primary meaning being "good". In the Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary*, however, "clever", "skilful", and "expert" are given as the first meanings, although its opposite *akusala* is given only the sense of "bad, evil". The two terms *kusala* and *akusala* are frequently combined as epithets of the *dhammas*; "the (mental) phenomena", sometimes translated as "states", and we often read in translations of the abandoning of "unskilled states" and the arising

[37] See Norman, 1983C, 36.

[38] In the Theragāthā we find that Dabba refers to himself as *parinibbuto* (Th 5) as does Ānanda (Th 1047). In the Therīgāthā we find the same of Ubbirī (Thī 53), and the Pañcasatā Paṭācārā (Thī 132).

of “skilled states”, although translators rarely try to explain what a skilled or unskilled state is. The commentaries make it clear that we are, in fact, dealing with good and bad (mental) phenomena.

Publication of the *Pali-English Dictionary* was completed in 1925, so the last fascicles are nearly 70 years old, while the earlier fascicles are more than 70 years old. At the time of its publication it represented the summit of philological achievement in the field of Pāli studies, but even so it contained numerous errors, as well as misleading statements of the sort I have just mentioned. Since 1925 editions of many hitherto unpublished Pāli texts have appeared, so that it is woefully incomplete, while better editions of many of the texts which are referred to in it have been published, so that many corrections of forms and meanings are needed. The Pali Text Society is fully aware of this, and a revised version of the *Pali-English Dictionary*, to be called the *New Pāli-English Dictionary*, is in preparation.[39]

Until that is published, the *Pali-English Dictionary* is the best complete dictionary of the Pāli language we have, and despite all its failings it is still used by most Pāli scholars. I have already mentioned the way in which would-be translators have perhaps looked words up in the dictionary and have ascertained meanings for them, and then have used these meanings as the basis for their intuition. It is, however, difficult to persuade many scholars that they must be very wary of taking everything they find in the dictionary as infallible. I remember asking one scholar how he proposed to solve some of the problems which I knew existed in a text he was proposing to translate. He told me that he would give every word in his text the meanings given in the *PED*, and he asked me very indignantly how I expected him to translate the text if the *PED* meanings were not correct.

These problems arise because there is a strange sanctity attached to the printed word. In the same way that people used to say, “It must be true, because I read it in *The Times*”, so when I offer critical comments on suggestions which people send me, and hint that their translation of some Pāli word or phrase should be changed, they reply that I must be wrong, because they took whatever it is they have written from the *PED*. When I come back with the retort, “Yes, I know it is in the *PED*, but it is wrong, and we are going to change it in the revised edition”, they are still very reluctant to believe that anything which has appeared in print can be incorrect. I do not know what sort of persons they think the editors of the first edition were, but they have certainly imparted some sort of infallibility to them. It is quite clear that they have never read the comments about Rhys Davids in the Afterword to the *Dictionary*, which William Stede wrote when the final

[39] It is being prepared by Dr Margaret Cone, Assistant Director of Research in Pāli Lexicography, in the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge.

fascicle appeared, some three years after Rhys Davids' death: "His mind was bent on other aims than dictionary work, which was not his strongest point", or Stede's statement about the joint editors' motto: "Better now and imperfect, than perfect and perhaps never!"[40]

There is also, I believe, a reluctance to believe that present-day scholars, mere mortals, can improve on anything in the *Dictionary*. I can only hope that when the revised edition appears it too will gain the veneer of infallibility which the printed word imparts. I am encouraged to think that it will do so, because I find that the same sanctity is becoming attached to *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*, not simply the early fascicles produced by Helmer Smith and Dines Andersen, who were perhaps the greatest Pāli philologists that Europe has produced, but also more recent fascicles. In something that I was writing recently I had occasion to quote from an article I had earlier written for *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*, as part of my involvement in the dictionary. However, in the time since writing the article I had thought of a way of expressing my solution to a particular problem in a slightly different way. I showed what I had written to a colleague, and he returned my material to me with the comment that he thought I should quote what *A Critical Pāli Dictionary* said about this problem.

I could go on at some length about the light which a philological approach has shed upon many of the key words in Indian Buddhism, with a resultant improvement in our understanding of such terms, and a greater accuracy in the translations we can give for them, but I have probably said enough for one lecture.

[40] *PED*, 738.