

Issues with Pāli Literature and its Translation

By Bhikkhu Dhammarakkhita (Mahāviveka)
June 2018

“For these are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world. And of these a Tathāgata makes use indeed, but is not led astray by them.”

_Buddha (DN 9.53. tr. Rhys Davids)

A hundred and twenty years have now elapsed since the British Pāli pioneer T. W. Rhys Davids wrote about the unique characteristics and features of Pāli literature, and of the difficulties of its translation in English, in a time when there was nearly no knowledge of Pāli literature in the Western World. And nearly four decades have passed since Paul J. Griffiths coined the term “Buddhist Hybrid English”^{*}, mostly echoing exactly the same observations made by Davids 80 years earlier, in the context of his purposeful criticism of the problematic state of English translations of Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Today, we would need only exclude very few exceptional attempts of *sensible* translations of Pāli, in order to be justified in exclaiming that these observations made by Davids and Griffiths, along with several other scholars and observers, in the near and distant past, have been mostly ignored by later translators, and have not been taken into consideration as observations which could have provided useful guidance for their translation methods, strategies, and attitudes.

Before proceeding in whatever directions this paper will wander at, I must at first state that I myself never claim to be in any way an “expert” in Pāli or in Indic linguistics. I have only been studying Pāli and experimenting with translation of Suttas to both English and Arabic (for about four years now), supported in this process by a long time interest in (and some basic academic study of) linguistics and literary criticism, and a decade-long intermittent work experience in translation. The thing which spurred me to write this paper however was that, numerous times, I am asked about the worth or value, or about my “opinion”, regarding this or that Pāli translation or translator. Previously I used to answer that such kind of evaluation is something that differs greatly from one person to another, and that each person should be able to develop their own independent evaluations and opinions of such translation work regardless of the opinions of others. But as I say this, I only crash in the embarrassment and discomfort of sounding too uncaring and unfriendly toward the person who has taken interest in my opinion, and who reached out to me with the hope of receiving a more satisfactory answer. I thought about how to escape this rather recurrent dilemma and found that the best way is to attempt to share whatever knowledge I have regarding the unique features of Pāli literature, and regarding “how to judge”

* Paul John Griffiths. *Buddhist Hybrid English: Some Notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists*. Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies. Vol.4. No.2. 1981.

the worth and value of a Pāli translation work; especially given that one of the reasons which drive people to ask in the first place is that they really don't know how to evaluate such matters independently, and simply seek to find one authority (the opinion of someone they trust) to point them to trust in another authority (this or that translation/translator) and put their minds at rest after that.

Naturally, in all matters of language and of literature, there is no such thing as "authority", neither of a translation nor of an opinion of it; and a truly interested reader ought to be able to judge for himself or herself the worth and value of an original or translated work. Nevertheless, admittedly there are such unique languages and literatures around the world which involve certain difficulties involved with the experience of understanding and appreciating their significance and value. Such difficulties render the evaluation of an original work, and more so of a translation of it, inaccessible to people who, however much interested in that literature, yet are not sufficiently familiar with the original language with which it is written, nor with the content which it provides. This is unfortunately the situation, and par excellence, in the case of Pāli language and literature. Even though the Pāli language itself is remarkably simple and easy (aside perhaps from its characteristic "abstractedness" and absence of specificity and precision even on the grammatical level!), yet translation into English of what has been recorded particularly in the Suttapitaka (that part of Pāli literature which includes the discourses and dialogues of Buddha and which preserves His most important teachings, and with which I am concerned in this paper) has proven to be rather difficult and involving complexity, manifesting in either the visible variance and disparity, or near identicalness, across the various translations of it (so far mostly in English), rendering interested readers continually puzzled and perplexed regarding "which translation is better".

While no translation needs to be better than others *in every respect*, and while translations may vary in those respects in which they show strengths or weaknesses; and while also the peculiar attitude or even, strategy of the translator, as one of the most significant influences which shapes the identity and character of the translated text, is something which can hardly be evaluated "objectively" (that is, independently from the peculiar aesthetic taste and preferences of the reader as well) – despite of all that, it so happens that we can often single out certain important aspects that are unique to the language and literature that is being translated, and which will represent themselves as challenges equally to all translators without exception. In so far as we are able to identify those challenging aspects with clarity and sureness, we can then discern how the different translators worked them out in their various different ways; and it is precisely this that we can evaluate in the work of translators: how did they solve these problems and manage these difficulties in their translation. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to point out those characteristically problematic and challenging aspects of Pāli language and literature, address the ways translators have so far been engaging with them, and discuss the various ways and tools which may possibly be of relevance to solving these problems in further translation efforts. So I sincerely hope that this paper will at least contribute positively and usefully to the understanding of those who are really interested in Pāli literature, and will help them become better able to independently evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of present and future translations, and in whatever language.

I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude to Venerable Aggadhamma of Sagaing, Myanmar, for sharing many of his valuable perspectives regarding manifold questions of Pāli usage referred to here in this paper.

The most usual and common situation that we find in the academic world, is that every specialist in nearly every academic field in the Humanities, regards translation (or at least can regard it) as some kind of a “*sub-category*” of their specialisations, and of which they could voice “objective” criticisms, so long the translated work is sufficiently related to their specialisation. In this fashion, scholars of literary criticism, or those of philosophy for example, criticise translations of literature and philosophy respectively - specifically, they would criticise the *understanding* of the translator of the literary or intellectual *content* which he set out to translate, and laud or lament the representation in the translated text of the literary qualities and ideas of the original work and so forth. Though the same situation exists to a small extent in criticisms of translations of Pāli literature, yet our situation differs significantly in that for the most part, criticisms so far have been mostly concerned with “language” rather than “content”; that is, the trouble here is not that the translator *misunderstands* original ideas and fails to appreciate original literary forms, but rather that he is unable to *reproduce* them in such a way that will make them equally understandable and appreciable in the target language, except, as Griffiths notes (p.20), for those readers who are already versed in the subject (here Buddhism, Dhamma, etc.) and sufficiently informed about its technical terms, cryptic references, and the subtle connotations and purport of these. This situation makes “language experts” (in Pali, Sanskrit, Prakrits, and Indio-Aryan linguistics in general), rather than “Dhamma experts” (that is, experts in the subject and content), to be the ones most *qualified* to criticise Pāli translations as if that was a part, a sub-category, of their expertise! This situation is reinforced further by the fact that there are indeed many open questions about the historical origin and identity of Pāli as a whole (natural spoken dialect vs. artificial literary language), and about several of its linguistic features which to some extent effect the work of translators.

Unlike the case in the philosophy and psychology, and also theology and religion written in most other ancient and old languages – our dilemma is that, in as much as those Pāli texts afford us with access to Dhamma, they also to a certain extent do stand as a barrier between our intelligence, intuition, and intent to learn, and on the other hand that Buddhist Dhamma which we seek to learn. Thus, Pāli here is not a barrier to understanding in the same way a simple descriptive German text is, for example, to one who is not sufficiently proficient in German; but rather as the peculiarly *subjective* and highly poetic German style of Martin Heidegger for example, would be even to a native or fluent speaker of German. Thus (and contrary to what a Pāli expert like K. R. Norman wishes us to believe! P.9-12,179*), there is no level of proficiency in Pāli or Sanskrit at which the barrier to Dhamma-understanding even begins to vanish! Certainly, as is the case in any language, the more intimate and proficient becomes one’s knowledge of Pāli and Indo-Aryan linguistics, the more one will be able to read the texts fluently and make less “obvious mistakes” and less “wrong” grammatical interpretations. But, as you will mostly agree, translations of Pāli and Sanskrit Buddhist texts have not been so consistently

* Kenneth Roy Norman. *A Philological Approach to Buddhism*. University of London. 1997.

ambiguous, unfriendly, alienating, and “sounding strange”, because of these minor and scattered mistakes that translators sometimes do (not so often really!); but rather because there are in fact certain very unique features, inherent in both (1) the Pāli and Sanskrit languages themselves and the unique manner of their *usage*, and (2) the subtle intellectual content (or *experience* really) which the language attempts to convey and give expression to. Both of these features are to a considerable extent unknown in Western science, wisdom, and writing, and they will both prove equally challenging to all translators without exception, irrespective of their linguistic mastery.

This means that our difficulties and challenges in translating Pāli literature are not confined to the understanding and interpretation of those unique words conveying unique concepts and experiences, but are also related to the understanding and appreciation of how language itself was *used* and how it was intended to be used. An understanding of this will immediately show that a translator cannot approach Pāli literature in a usual manner and methodology (as if it was *merely another literature!*), and that should he do so, the result in the target language will be ambiguous and confounding; sounding nothing like either the verbal speech or written literature of that language. This is what Griffiths refers to as “Buddhist Hybrid English”, where Pāli keywords (almost a Buddhist jargon) are being translated to equally jargonistic and unfamiliar words and combinations of words in the target language, and not always because no current or suitable equivalents can be found in that language and literature, but mostly out of devotion and commitment to represent the most literal or exact semantic meaning of the original Pāli, more than to represent, reflect, and convey the essence of reality or experience they actually give expression to, through a more-than-verbal interpretation of what is retained in the original text.

And in turn, this means that an “effective” translation of Pāli literature requires on the part of translators a significantly enhanced effort of “interpretation”, not at all dissimilar to the work of archaeologists in their examination of very ancient objects and inscriptions describing very ancient things. The difference is that Pāli, as a language, is so much more clearer and simpler than Hieroglyphic for example; and the translator of Pāli literature is mostly free from the burdensome task of having to closely trace and inspect the history and origin of purely symbolic signs, or the lexical and semantic origin and evolution of every single “glyph” he comes across. The other main difference here is that, while the interpretive training, knowledge, and skill of the archaeologist are mostly bent on matters of mundane history (that of physical matter and craftsmanship, geography, demography, social and political structures, and so forth), and without which his very understanding of that which he is deciphering will be faulty and lacking, and depending on speculation and even sheer imagination which later only becomes outdated and refuted by more serious knowledge of the history associated with the examined object or text – on the other hand the interpretive training, knowledge, and skill of the Sutta-translator *should be* bent on matters of “Dhamma”, that is, matters of psychology and philosophy of mind, cosmology, meditation, and renunciation – utterly experiential and down-to-earth as is the case with everything that the Buddha had ever said, and lacking at the same time *entirely* any emphasis on abstract conceptualisation which on the other hand persists visibly, as method and as means of reaching (or conjuring!) truth, in all Western “science” of human and of mind.

In this sense, the idea that a translator of Suttas, however much skilled in Pāli, can even begin to truly understand those incredibly profound aspects of Dhamma which the Buddha reveals, simply by reading the text, is as absurd as the idea that it suffices for an archaeologist to examine

the external features of an unusual object in order to readily and immediately decipher its meaning and significance, without having to painstakingly investigate the entire range of demonstrable history that is associated with it (and indeed, how many times many of these colonial “Sirs” have contemplated ancient texts and objects without true research and knowledge of the history associated with them, and how blatantly false and absurd, so it turned out, were many of their bombastic and impressive conclusions about these ancient things, which they at one point asserted with adamant confidence, all of which lapses now without any true value, apart perhaps from to students of historiography!). I contend that the exact same situation applies to a Sutta-translator, of course not in every part of the text, but certainly in the most important parts of it, where profound and subtle aspects of *experience* and *practice* are concerned. And a reader or student of Dhamma has every reason to doubt the “interpretations” of a translator who, however much proficient in Pāli, yet has no true experiential access to the Dhamma which the text describes, and which he, too, may be deluded enough to assert with adamant confidence!

But in truth many translators have so far mostly been avoiding the burden (or “risk”) of interpretation almost entirely (perhaps “to remain on the safe side” and say nothing that will later be proven so blatantly and embarrassingly false!) - perhaps, then, this is why it has become nearly an established tradition in English translations, to stick to the strict lexical and semantic connotations of Pāli words, on the expense (and heavy one!) of reflecting in the target language the continually vibrant *intended meaning* in the original Pāli. This is quite similar to the situation where an archaeologist describes to you the shape, color, and such other purely physical features of some ancient object, without saying a word about how it was made and for what use or purpose, or about its historical significance! Indeed, the average lay reader of translations of Pāli Suttas is continually puzzled, in a way very similar to the puzzlement of a museum visitor who beholds a very curious ancient object but finds not the note describing it in the display. And further, this situation would not be different from that where a language expert who has never stretched his body in a meditative fashion goes on to translate an ancient book about “yoga”. He will be puzzled by the specific language which describes the various details of body posture and movement, along with their corresponding physical and mental effects. And though, being a language expert, he may rely on etymological references to grasp the meaning of these descriptions, nevertheless he will have committed quite a big mistake by not verifying his own understanding with an expert in yoga rather than in language.

This brings us to the spot where much of the confusion regarding Pāli literature and its translation originates: I believe it all mostly comes from the evident disparity between the culture and science of ancient India on the one hand, and those which originate in the Western Age-of-Enlightenment on the other. For ancient Indian psychology and philosophy of mind (along with the “expression” thereof) -and even if, or particularly if, we exclude from the comparison the cosmological dimensions altogether!- are fundamentally different from those which are rooted in Western scientific traditions and methods. Adding to that the dynamic and complex linguistic situation that had prevailed (and to some extent still does) in that curious part of the world in north India, and which gave birth to Pāli in its final, written form, possibly as a literary language following a *diglossic* path of historical development, hence also following a manner of “language-usage” that is also unfamiliar or even discordant with Western writing. The Western-educated reader, researcher, or translator, is therefore encountering something that he cannot immediately or readily understand by taking recourse to his own Western education, culture, or

even intuitive reasoning; and this being the case on two most important and intimately connected levels: those of the very ideas and their verbal expression. But in his attempt to understand and interpret such ancient Indian ideas and their expression, he ever continues to rely precisely on his own Western education and culture! If he does not abandon his standpoint and truly embrace that which he seeks to understand, at best by experiencing it in its fullest reality, and at least by being able to imagine such reality with a sound intuition – it will be very difficult for him to truly understand it; and not just that, but it is likely that he (as his predecessors did!) will fill the gaps (which may be quite giant!) by unfounded presumptions and speculations about those very ideas and their expression. This is why the kind of microscopic analysis of data that has been trusted for so long due to its reliability in other areas, will in this area yield but humble results, and will far from guarantee any certitude regarding both Dhamma and the languages describing it.

This is not to say that there is nothing good in Western scholarship of Pāli language, but only that it has its natural limitations and in the way the yoga example above demonstrates. The best that a research on language can offer is better knowledge about language, but not necessarily about what the language describes! And the translator of the yoga ancient book has little, if anything, to offer to the yoga expert which he needed in order to be able to translate the book in the first place! His contribution, however, will be considerable to those who are not expert in yoga and seek to learn it; and the translator will have been aided in that great contribution not only by his enhanced knowledge of the language which he translates (thanks to the language experts), but equally by his enhanced knowledge of its content and subject (thanks to the yoga experts). This is identical to the translation of any literature; and any worthwhile translation is conditioned by the absorption of the translator of the languages involved (both original and target) and the subject matter, along with sufficient talent, experience, and skill in translation (of which I will speak more later). And though I admit that, unlike the case with yoga, it can be extremely difficult even to define what is a “Dhamma expert”, and where are they to be found – this does not in the least mean that expertise in language should [therefore!] suffice to explain its subject, or that there is no more any role for “experience” to play in our understanding of it, or, further, that that Dhamma is not, in fact and inherently, utterly “experiential”, to be known each for and by himself [“*Paccattam veditabbo viññuhi*”].

Much of what I’m aiming at expressing in this paper, and which I came to learn and acquire only through ongoing experience with translating Pāli to both English and Arabic, is that an “effective” translation of Pāli literature, that is, a translation which will impress the ears and minds and hearts of listeners in a way at least similar to listening to it from the very mouth of the Buddha as it is preserved in the original Pāli, can be achieved only through a first-hand, genuine understanding of Dhamma, and then by a greater degree of devotion to the contemporaneous, living expression and culture of the target language, rather than to those of the ancient Pāli and ancient India. As I said and will say further, the languages and cultures differ even on the level of “usage”; and presently, most of the English translations of Suttas that we have fail in engaging the average reader in any way that even nears representing how much appealing, intriguing, and curious these Suttas actually *are!* And even to those who are already established in Dhamma, to an extent or another, they know better than others how the present translations serve -to them- as a somewhat cryptic or coded form of Dhamma representation, the subtlety of which they have to

decipher as they read, in order to penetrate to the true meaning, often by referring to (or imagining what would be) the original Pāli of which they are now already somewhat familiar. This class of experienced students and practitioners read and understand these English Sutta translations in the same way an experienced reader or student of psychology, for example, reads and understands the following text:

“The momentary effective reaction potential of a stimulus must exceed the reaction *limen* before that stimulus can evoke a certain reaction.”

Now “limen” is a Latin word of technical meaning in psychology, which persists in some modern academic writing, just as the Pāli “Tathāgata” or “bhikkhu” do in some English translations for example. But, are our troubles with understanding this little sentence, as lay readers, solved by supplying the English equivalent of “limen”? I think far from it:

“The momentary effective reaction potential of a stimulus must exceed the reaction *threshold* before that stimulus can evoke a certain reaction.”

This is basically what translations of Suttas are like! For the most part, translators endeavour to find the “most exact” equivalents of individual Pāli words, on the lexical and semantic levels (rather than those of “connotation and purport”), and simply construct the same sentence in the target language with the multiplicity of individual words they have picked as “accurate” equivalents of the original Pāli. As K. R. Norman puts it, translations of this sort “may consist of little more than strings of Sanskrit, Pāli or Tibetan words linked together with ‘ands’ and ‘buts’.” (p.21). The result is nothing but hopeless “ambiguity” - for the only way for us to truly understand a sentence such as this quoted above, is not by examining individual words and their combinations, but only by examining what the text “intends” to convey:

“In order for a stimulus to condition a reaction, the effect of that stimulus must be greater than the *resistance* of the receptive organ to stimulation.”

Now the problem is solved! Not through lexical translation, but only through some effort of “interpretation” and understanding of the “purport” of the original sentence, and further, by employing such verbal usage that differs from the original text, and which one knows (intuits) is within grasp of the linguistic culture and experience of the lay reader. Griffiths notes:

“The third—and most important—step on the path to understanding a given text is that of appropriating its meaning, of making explicit to oneself one’s understanding of the intentions of the text’s author. It is at this point that creative thinking begins to operate, and it is only when this point has been reached that any attempt at interpretation is likely to have success. [...] All that can be said is that a necessary condition for the attainment of this third stage is the ability on the part of the Buddhologist to restate what he takes to be the meaning(s) of his text in terms other than those employed by its author.” (Griffiths pp.19-20).

And in line with this, what has become of the original “limen” in our creative and interpretive exercise? Quite a different word came to represent it: “resistance” (for here, the “threshold” of

sensorial contact is crossed only when organic “resistance” to it gives way). And of course this is not being said here in order to downplay the significance of lexical and etymological significations (as it is still important, even essential, to learn that “limen” originally means “threshold”), but only to show that a good translation sometimes *requires* the translator to go beyond such etymological significations. And surely, my interpretation in this case can be viewed to be more of a “commentary” than a translation (although this is unfair, given that I’m here translating from English to English!). Fine! But the real big question that arises at this point is: is the original Pāli even comparable to that jargonistic sentence quoted above? Do we need in the case of Pāli literature to go so far in our adaptations, and to make such “double translation” - firstly of language, and secondly of meaning- as we did in the case of the Latin “limen”? Is the Pāli text that we have today actually cryptic and coded in a similar way to the text quoted above?

The answer is definitely “no”! Though this does not make Pāli literature a simple and straightforward one, and though there is no doubt that we are *sometimes* faced with very tough Pāli terms and ambiguous descriptions of ambiguous phenomena and narratives – yet this is far from being the predominant case; and this indeed is one significant way in which Pāli (Theravada) texts differ from Sanskrit (Mahayana) ones, where ambiguity in the later case seem to really abound even in the original Sanskrit, to the extent which makes Griffiths suggest that:

“... translation [of Sanskrit Buddhist texts] is very frequently not the best way of performing the hermeneutical task, a fact rarely realized by practicing Buddhologists, most of whom stand transfixed in awe of their texts and are concerned largely to transmit them by means of translation regardless of whether or not they have been understood.” (p.20). “It is just because most [Sanskrit] *sūtras* are either excessively long or obscurely short, cryptically incomprehensible or repetitively obvious, and just because they lack the marks of clear and precise thinking, that most of them do not benefit from translation and are better interpreted in other ways.” (p.26).

Another, early, and heartfelt complaint about the obscurity of Sanskrit Buddhist texts and its difference from those of Pāli, comes from Henry Clarke Warren, who wrote in 1900:

“After long bothering my head over Sanskrit, I found much more satisfaction when I took up the study of Pāli. For Sanskrit literature is a chaos; Pāli, a cosmos.” (*Buddhism in Translations*. Harvard University. 1900. p.xix).

Obviously we are not so consistently faced with similar unredeemable obscurities and “untranslatable” concepts in Pāli, and we can “perform the hermeneutical task” by meaningfully reconstructing Pāli sentences and phrases in the target language like good integrated and honest translators, that is, without having to compromise neither the content nor the structure of the original. The trouble with Pāli is usually limited to a multiplicity of important and frequently used key terms and expressions that are [by themselves] really untranslatable, not only on the lexical level, but also on the conceptual one, that is, the concepts themselves, along with the realities and experiences to which they refer or give expression, have no satisfactory matches or equivalents not only in Western languages, but also in Western thought. The careful and diligent student and reader of the Suttas will quite easily notice this problem, not only as he or she compares various translations of the same text and thereby witness the struggle of the translator

to nail a certain difficult Pāli expression in the target language, but it will often suffice to glean that struggle simply from the context of the one translation.

But despite of this great advantage which Pāli literature has over Sanskrit, yet ambiguity has been the most prominent feature of Pāli translations just as well! And more of this ambiguity appears in the translated text the more the translator aspires after “exactness”, “accuracy”, and “consistency”! Words like “dhamma”, “dukkha”, and “sankhāra”, to name just a few, carry within and around themselves a whole spectrum, an aura or halo of effective and potential meaning – and though upon hearing any one of them they will evoke in the experienced intuition of an experienced listener a recognition of something specific and exact, depending on the context in which they are uttered – nevertheless, as words in and of themselves they have no such exact and fixed semantic meanings as those we intuit in any of their fixed European equivalents. What the translator has done here, and most probably unconsciously, is to reduce that entire spectrum of meaning, and the existence of which he himself may be unaware, to a single exactly defined and fixed part of it; often resorting in the process to etymological references which may even be semantically-irrelevant. K. R. Norman notes:

“It is very difficult to give a one for one translation of Sanskrit and Pāli words into English. It is very rare that one Sanskrit or Pāli word has exactly the same connotations, no less and no more, as one English word. [...] Consequently, if I am translating a Buddhist text into English, it is very difficult to produce something which approximates closely to the meaning of the original, and yet appears in good, clear, concise and readable English.” (p.21).

The kind of “habit” which drives a translator to relate in this way to such hardly definable, but vital Pāli words, comes from the translator’s culture and education which regard such exactness and precision of speech as a necessary characteristic and requirement of serious knowledge and wisdom, or of “science” (in the Latin sense of the word) – all of which conditions the translator to not only seek, but excel in seeking, the “most exact” equivalent in the target language. And moreover, they condition him further to presume that the same condition of exactness applies even to the Pāli itself, which prevents him further from being able to envisage the subtleties of these Pāli words, and of how, in their natural cultural context and original tongue, they impress and appeal to the intuition of the listener in a significantly different way than do the same words, or words in general, in the translator’s own culture and language:

“We are inclined, in western philology, to believe that there is only one correct answer to a question of etymology. In India, however, there was a custom of seeing more than one meaning in any word or phrase -the so-called *sleṣa*. So, instead of saying the meaning is either this *or* that, as we would do, commentators very often say that the meaning is this *and* that. Sometimes the meanings they give include what we would regard as the correct etymology, but sometimes they are all, from our point of view, incorrect. These are not, however, intended as western-style etymologies, but they have rather a religious, or even mystical, purpose.” (K. R. Norman. p.161).

Such unique way through which these Pāli words (and Dhamma in general) appeal to the intuition is no magical feature which applies uniquely to Pāli; in fact it is not a feature of any

particular language, but rather of the “usage” of any language. Take “poetry” for example, and in any language, where single words become condensed with inferences and meanings that may be of subtle and profound connotation and purport, the production of which bears witness to the skill, creativity, and inspiration of the poet, and the grasp of which bears witness in turn to the intellectual and aesthetic sensitivity and cultivation of the reader or listener – all of which differs significantly from other uses of the same language (say in academic or journalistic writing, or in common speech), where other conditions including “exactness” may be found. It appears quite clearly to me that Pāli literature occupies some middle ground between Western writing with all its emphasis on directness, exactness and consistency, and the highly poetic and abstracted Mahayana writings, which even actively and intentionally seek to stir the listener’s understanding (or even, *gnosis!*) through utterly intuitive and counter-intuitive means. This quasi-poeticness of Pāli usage is rarely, if ever, recognised as a relevant element or feature of Pāli literature, although I contend that it is not altogether hidden or camouflaged in the original Pāli; it only never goes to the extremes which we find in Sanskrit or Chinese texts, nor, if we were to regard it as a literary style, does it overstep its own purpose which is, in the case of Pāli, to convey the intended meaning in the most straightforward and simple way.

Though a discourse or dialogue by Buddha is not intended to be poetic, yet the condensation and non-exactness found in many of the words which He utilises come from the subtle and profound nature of the mental and psychological experiences which He endeavoured to reveal and explain to others, and even in the simplest possible way. This is the main reason why these words contain so much information or describe too many things at once, much of which we as readers, and particularly “as practitioners”, keep discovering one layer after another as we progress in our experiential understanding of what the Buddha is explaining. Using too exactly and specifically defined terms to describe phenomena of that sort could only confound understanding rather than facilitate it. The other extreme (in opposition to “exactness”) is to go all the way Nagarjuna, and embark on that (desperate!) attempt to describe in any words what cannot possibly be fully and rightly grasped with the analytic and conceptualising mind (which is the case with “*Sunyata*” or “emptiness”). Again this surely is one of the most significant conditions which distinguish not only Pāli from Sanskrit Buddhist literature, but also Theravada from Mahayana approaches to Dhamma or Doctrine. There is in Pāli literature, and in Pāli “usage”, a clear recognition of the limitations of language in general:

“A mendicant with such an emancipated heart [...] will make use of the current language of the world without sticking to it.” _Buddha (MN 74 Dīghanakha Sutta).

Because of such realistic and mature awareness of the limitations of language, to which we find several references across the Suttas, language is being used “in the best possible way” and “as far as it can be effectively used”, but not beyond that. And though this is shown in how Pāli does not entertain the obscure excesses of Sanskrit Mahayana literature, yet this does not mean that Pāli is altogether devoid of poeticness or expressive subtleties. And not only that, but more over, this kind of “functional-poeticness” that we find in Pāli is employed only because it contributes positively to conveying the meaning rather than for any aesthetic preferences or purposes. This is evidenced in the fact that even Pāli *verse* is mostly devoted to meaning rather than to art, aside solely from its commitment to “metre”.

The ambiguity and disparity which appears quite clearly through the comparison of the various translations of key Pāli terms and expressions, is itself the evidence that translators have been seeking to find in them some single rational point of reference (of meaning) where in fact no such thing exists, for otherwise, it surely would have been found by now! Or at least interpretive variance and even disagreement regarding it, would not have been so persistently visible. The reader is reminded here that we are not now talking about variance of aesthetic taste or style (such as when one translator uses “sky” while another prefers “heaven”; or when one translates “manussa” as “man” while another as “human”, etc.): these variances are completely unproblematic and even expected; but the trouble is when such variances pertain directly to the defining and understanding of the very essential purport of words of psychological or philosophical significance, or of those which pertain to experience and practice. What these translations show us is that they are faring in such a fashion that is so dissimilar from “scientific progress”, where criticism and revision of “rational hypotheses” is said to lead to a better understanding of the object under examination! But we find no such “progress” through the criticism and revision of Pāli translations, nor an increased or improved understanding of the translated word. The margin of this interpretive variance does not even seem to be “tightening” in the course of time, as one would expect the case to be if there was indeed any such strictly definable rational point of reference in these tricky Pāli words. Instead we only crash into that old wall of confusion each time a new equivalent is being proposed (and used), and especially when it does not seem to relate in any meaningful way to earlier contributions, and perhaps even challenge and negate them!

And while many at this point argue that such exact and precise meaning did exist then and warrants our search after it through microscopic etymological or semantic examination now, or that such exact meaning has now become lost beyond our grasp – my view [and experience] is that the utilisation of such condensed and non-exact key expressions in Pāli facilitates comprehension rather than confounds it! It is only that this does not apply equally to all minds; that is, such expressions evoke in the understanding various impressions that can be grasped only through an active and vibrant *intuition* that takes recourse to experience, and by hearing them repeated again and again in various contexts, until their entire *range of meaning* becomes fully acquired and retained in memory; they are not to be fully grasped through a single act of analytic reasoning, which soon falters in its own faith as soon as the same expression reappears in even a slightly different context, and then the reasoning finds itself re-embarking on the same quest of finding yet another more accurate or correct understanding which fits the new context while abandoning the one formerly believed to be correct! Most of us have already experienced, and maybe continue to experience, this hesitation and indecision in making up our minds about what these various Pāli words really mean - this is evidently the experience of translators too.

The reason one does never find satisfaction or certitude in pinning down the exact meaning of such Pāli words is not that one is failing in finding a satisfactory equivalent in the target language, but rather because one does not understand the subtle manner in which these words were used, and goes on to search in the target language for an equivalent that carries the exact lexical meaning rather than *does the same “effect”*. This is the key to this problematic issue and which points out its solution: The translator must sometimes seek to grasp the “effect” of a certain word in the original Pāli; then it will become much easier for him to find an equivalent that will exercise the same effect in the target language, even if he will then be forced to depart -

in that particular context- from the “exact” or lexical connotation of that Pāli word (as we did earlier in the case of the Latin “limen”). With few exceptions, translators have only rarely been doing this.

Thus, there is a need to understand that such dense key Pāli words succeed in effectively pointing the intuition of the reader of original Pāli to their specific intended meanings, only through the repeated experience of that intuition with every particular word, not through the one-time analysis and defining of it which is then retained in memory without further modification or augmentation. What is retained in memory through the gradual and repeated intuitive experience with a subtle Pāli word is rather its entire range of possible intended meanings and connotations, to the extent of being able to understand that the one and the same Pāli word, especially in combination with another word, can carry such meaning that is even incompatible or contradictory with its other uses in other contexts! There are many examples of this in Pāli: Words like “sīla” and “chanda” can in fact be viewed as “neutral”, that is, they can be used to refer to both good and bad mental or psychological capacities or conditions (sīla could refer to both good or bad “conscience”, useful or harmful moral beliefs and practices, etc.). This inherent neutrality of some Pāli words serves as a good example of the non-exactness of meaning, the like of which exists equally in all languages (and often also causes ambiguity). The only difference is that such neutral Pāli words cover a wider range or spectrum of possible meanings and shades of meaning than do their equivalents in the target language. Take the word “desire” in English for example (one possible translation of “chanda”), just like the Pāli “chanda”, it can evoke in the intuition of the listener either good or bad connotations (what kind of desire: obsessive or self-conscious? And desire for what: to help or to harm? etc.). So it is a neutral word, and the sole factor which will determine its intended connotation is the context. This is also the case in Pāli; the difference being that the Pāli “chanda” encompasses a greater range or capacity of expression, and is capable of reaching beyond what the English “desire” could effectively convey (such as “ambition”, “passion”, “determination”, “zeal”, “self-application”, etc.), and in that case, continuing to use the English “desire” as the most exact or relevant equivalent, rather than shift to another word which is more effective in conveying the intended meaning, will fall short of reflecting that meaning of the original “chanda” in the various contexts in which it appears. That’s why “desire” is only one *possible* translation of “chanda”, but not the only or consistent one. Much of the ambiguity that we find in Pāli translations comes from this situation, as the translator often finds himself confronted by the frequent challenge in the Pāli text, where the exact same single word is being repeated in the same paragraph, or even the same sentence (as in “Pātimokkha saṃvara saṃvuta viharathā” for example, which is often problematically translated as “Abides restrained by the restraint of the Pātimokkha [monastic rules]”).

Let us now examine more closely some of these prominent translation challenges as they appear in the following curious and important passage:

“Seyyathāpi, mahārāja, rājā khattiyo muddhābhisisitto nihatapaccāmitto na kutoci bhayañ samanupassati, yadidañ paccatthikato; evameva kho, mahārāja, bhikkhu evañ sīlasampanno na kutoci bhayañ samanupassati, yadidañ sīlasaṃvarato. So iminā ariyena sīlakkhandhena samannāgato ajjhattañ anavajjasukhañ paṭisāṇvedeti. Evañ kho, mahārāja, bhikkhu sīlasampanno hoti.” _Buddha (DN 2. Samaññaphala Sutta).

“Just as a head-anointed noble warrior who has defeated his enemies sees no danger anywhere from his enemies, so the bhikkhu who is thus possessed of moral discipline sees no danger anywhere in regard to his restraint by moral discipline. Endowed with this noble aggregate of moral discipline, he experiences within himself a blameless happiness. In this way, great king, the bhikkhu is possessed of moral discipline.” Bhikkhu Bodhi

“Just as a head-anointed noble warrior king who has defeated his enemies sees no danger anywhere from his enemies, in the same way the monk thus consummate in virtue sees no danger anywhere from his restraint through virtue. Endowed with this noble aggregate of virtue, he is inwardly sensitive to the pleasure of being blameless. This is how a monk is consummate in virtue.” Bhikkhu Thanissaro

“Just as an anointed ruler who has defeated his enemies sees no danger anywhere on account of his enemies, in exactly the same way, a monk who is accomplished in moral behaviour in this way sees no danger anywhere on account of his restraint in moral behaviour. Possessed of this whole range of noble moral behaviour, he experiences the happiness of being without guilt. It is in this way, your majesty, that he is accomplished in moral behaviour.” Rupert Gethin

“It’s like a king who has defeated his enemies. He sees no danger from his foes in any quarter. In the same way, a mendicant thus accomplished in ethics sees no danger in any quarter in regards to their ethical restraint. When they have this entire spectrum of noble ethics, they experience a blameless happiness inside themselves. That’s how a mendicant is accomplished in ethics.” Bhikkhu Sujato

Firstly, from an aesthetic point of view, the recurrence in these translated examples of the same English equivalent of “*sīla*” (and also of “*paccāmitta*” = “enemies”) can only be viewed as a total disaster! Yet, *heard* in the original Pāli this recurrence is at best appealing and at worst acceptable! But aside from all aesthetic considerations here, and if one is able to read the original Pāli with a degree of easiness, it might then dawn upon one that it is precisely in reading (hearing!) a passage like this that one becomes better able to finally sense the many various shades of meaning associated with this single word “*sīla*” (and similarly with other key Pāli words in other passages); and that indeed, if one was to endeavour to represent that passage in another language *effectively*, one would then need to reflect those shades of meaning in the translation by using different words, rather than stick to the one and the same chosen equivalent of “*sīla*” through out the passage. Rhys Davids had bravely taken an interpretive approach to this tough passage:

“Just, O king, as a sovereign, duly crowned, whose enemies have been beaten down, sees no danger from any side; that is, so far as enemies are concerned, so is the Bhikshu confident. And endowed with this body of morals, so worthy of honour, he experiences, within himself, a sense of ease without alloy. Thus is it, O king, that the Bhikshu becomes righteous.” Rhys Davids

And I venture here the following interpretation:

“Just as a Khattiya, a noble of the military elite, having vanquished his enemies, stands upon the throne of kingship with his head anointed and with none to fear – so too, your majesty; having purified his conscience, the mendicant sees nothing in his own moral behaviour to be unconfident about. Endowed with this sense of noble righteousness, within himself, he feels the bliss of being free of guilt. Thus, you majesty, is the mendicant’s purity of conscience.”

Now what distinguishes these two interpretive translations is precisely their devotion to the target language, which is reflected in a higher level of freedom and purpose in handling the characteristic difficulties of this tough Pāli passage, and particularly in handling the repetition of the word “sīla” as it appears in different compounds: Where I use “conscience, morality, and righteousness” as various *[possible]* equivalents of it, Davids omits the repetition altogether; and where all translators stick to the literal meaning of “sīlasampanna” (as “accomplished in”, “consummate in”, or “possessed of” sīla), Davids makes an interpretation of *what that means*, rendering it “righteous” (and I use “of pure conscience”) – all of which are ways to render the translated text unambiguous and effectively expressive. Further, it does not yield the best result here to translate the compound “sīlakkhana” word-for-word; as “body of morals” (Davids), “aggregate of moral discipline” (Bodhi), “aggregate of virtue” (Thanissaro), “whole range of noble moral behaviour” (Gethin), or “entire spectrum of ethics” (Sujato).

Note further the envisaging of equivalents other than the standard and consistent “noble” for “ariya” (where Davids uses a reference to “honour”), “restraint” for “saṃvara” (where I use “behaviour”), and “blameless happiness” for “anavajjasukha” (here, using “blameless” as an adjective of “happiness” misses the point! The mendicant feels happy or “blessed” [hence the “sense of ease”] because of *being* blameless or guilt-free *[avippatisāra]*, as Davids, Thanissaro, and Gethin correctly note). Note also how “bhikkhu” is being left untranslated (in other translations, including that of Gethin above, “monk” is usually used) – for once, when the literal and exact translation of “mendicant” serves the meaning quite well in the target language, no one seems inclined to use it except for Sujato here!

Further, “bhaya” and “vedeti” here are open to much interpretation; for they serve as great examples of single words with a wide spectrum of meaning: “Vedeti” goes like this: to [reckon/know/perceive – realise/understand – experience – feel/sense – enjoy/suffer] – starting from the most purely cognitive all the way to the most specific category of emotion. There would therefore be no trouble at all in rendering: “He inwardly *enjoys* the bliss of being guilt-free.” And where “bhaya” is being understood by most translators here as a reference to fear or recognition of “danger”, yet only Davids uses “unconfidence” (i.e. “worry” or “hesitation”) as a better alternative to reflect the intended: The conqueror king and mendicant are “confident” and “secure” regarding their rule and virtue respectively, because the “*reason*” for unconfidence and insecurity has been subdued (which is “enemies” and “moral imperfection” respectively). Which brings us to “kutoci”, an important clue for a better grasp of this passage: First of all it is not necessarily a reference to “place”; and it seems that translators may have followed one another here in understanding it as such – translating it mostly as “anywhere”, or “any side” (Davids), and “any quarter” (Sujato). This really wouldn’t make much sense not only in English, but also in Pāli! In the few occasions where “kutoci” appears in the Suttas or commentaries, it is being used as a reference to the abstract idea of “source” or “origin”, not only in a sense of “place” but

also in a “causative” sense (as in “*Lakkhanarūpani na kutoci jāyanti*” = “Inherent physical qualities arise without a cause.”) – and by extension it can also be a reference to “time”, especially in the negatory “*na kutoci*”, meaning: “no more” or “no longer”. This simply *has to be* its meaning in this particular passage, such as to say: “having vanquished his enemies, he *no longer* worries (or) sees *no reason* to worry about antagonism.” (that is, he sees no further *source* of it) rather than to say: “he sees no danger *anywhere* from enemies”, which sounds uneasy in English and is also too literal even for a reference to place. The translator is unable to envisage any of these alternative interpretations mentioned above because he probably is not even trying or interested to do so! And this could possibly be a conscious decision. His primary concern, whether consciously or unconsciously, is to pin down the most certain meaning of the multitude of Pāli words as he comes across them individually one after another. The concern of how does it all convey, and sound, in the target language, is only secondary.

And because Pāli does have words which specifically mean “honour”, “enjoy”, and “no longer”, the inexperienced observer almost always comments here as follows: “If the Buddha or original text wanted to refer to ‘honour’ instead of ‘nobility’ (‘ariya’), or to say ‘enjoy’ instead of ‘experience’ (‘vedeti’), or ‘no longer’ instead of ‘anywhere’ (‘kutoci’) – why wouldn’t these specific words be used in the original Pāli?” Simply because a translator might judge that these Pāli words in that particular context do have the *effect* of those non-standard or non-literal English equivalents, at least more than would do their exact, literal, and standard matches. This is simply just as we might (and do) judge that it is better to translate the French “*pardonnez-moi*” as “excuse me” instead of “*pardon me*”, and although the original French is yet capable of saying “*excusez-moi*”! In other words (and this is basic!), a good translator is very alert even to subtle idiomatic uses in the original language, and it is his duty to find the best possible equivalents which will convey the sense in the target language.

Finally note how Davids avoids a literal reference to the “anointment of the head” (an ancient cultural practice of coronation and proclaiming sovereignty) and prefers to use instead: “sovereign, duly crowned” as clearer references in the culture of the target language. Translators’ interest and skill in reflecting such cultural and historical dimensions of the original text (such as references to “anointment” and to the “Khattiya” military elite in this particular passage) may vary significantly, and this is largely conditioned by the literary cultivation and interests of each translator, and by their ability to recognise the literary value and significance of these dimensions where ever they are found across the text, which, putting aside the “Jātaka” (colourful narratives of the Buddha’s previous births and lives), and aside from similes, puns and such like word-play, do not occur so very often in Pāli literature – appearing most visibly here in the use of “head-anointment” as a *symbolism* of the confident and secure ruler. Generally speaking, to ignore these cultural and historical elements completely may do much injustice to the translated literature. And though it is true that these may have no bearing on meaning whatsoever, nevertheless they may contribute significantly to reflecting certain qualities of the social and physical “environment”, and of the “character” and “tone” of the speaker or the narrator of the story (of which I will say more later – but note here how Gethin, and Henry C. Warren a century before him, skillfully uses “your majesty” as a form of address instead of the literal “great king” = “*mahārāja*”).

We must be aware that singling out one paragraph for examination is no fair way to make a general judgment about the entire work of a translator; and indeed, aside from the criticisms voiced here regarding this one passage, there are yet various points of strength and success in the general work of the respected translators quoted above. This passage that we have examined just now (and which at first sight may appear easy and unproblematic) was chosen in order that we may come to make our observations and reach our conclusions regarding some of the problematic issues with Pāli translations by examining a relatively clear and straightforward passage, of a common subject and usual usage of language, and without having to resolve to an unusual or exceptionally dense or complex original passage in order to make more bold observations and come to more colourful conclusions. Further, this passage is unique in that it points at once to various significant issues, and most importantly the unusual feature of Pāli usage where occurs a repetition of the same word in close succession, which helps reveal how such repetition makes much sense in the original Pāli only by being able to intuit the different shades of meaning associated with this word in such a situation. There are so many similar examples of this situation in Pāli literature but I do not wish to bore the reader with further such examinations. These examples serve as very instructive lessons of how Pāli usage can be at odds with the target language (here English in particular, since a similar phenomenon of word-repetition is frequently found, and is aesthetically valuable, in Arabic for example), and how these key Pāli words ought to be understood and handled in an appropriately and proportionately flexible and negotiable manner. In these examples appears so evidently that this potential of Pāli words to effectively point the intuition of the listener to even slightly different shades of meaning is not an abstract or poetic potential, but rather one used practically and effectively even in normal speech. And here, it will not be easy for me to find a similar pattern of verbal “usage” in any European language I know, perhaps because such usage is too rare or non-existent in a non-poetic genre. The evidence of the rarity of such usage in European languages manifests clearly also in how using a single equivalent for one of those condensed Pāli words (specifically “sīla” in the example above) leads to much ambiguity on the level of meaning and monotony on the level of sound; had these equivalents been capable of reflecting the various shades of meaning involved with the original Pāli word, we would not have found the translated text unclear or sounding strange.

Interestingly, in Arabic we occasionally do find similar uses of condensed and subtle words in spiritual *Sufi* writings (which sometimes greatly facilitates translation of Pāli words into Arabic). And in an English Christian spiritual context, perhaps (if I am not mistaken) words like “aim” and “temperance”, for the ears of those who are familiar with them, can perhaps be the best equivalents to “chanda” and “upekkha” respectively [along with other similar examples of which I’m unaware]. It may be possible that such condensation and profundity of meaning associated with certain keywords is a distinct feature of spiritual expression in various languages [a possibility which makes for a very interesting study!], and since much of the spiritual experience is to an extent or another shared across the various religions and cultures, we may and do find in numerous cases the exact same concepts, exercising the exact same effect in the listeners’ intuitions, only with different vocabulary in each case (for example the Arabic-Sufi “ذِكْر” or “zikr” = the Pāli-Buddhist “sati” and its Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan equivalents). Further, in a purely “secular” context, we have the multiplicity of academic expressions and jargon of psychology and philosophy of mind, which sometimes find their way to mainstream writing and which can be used to reflect certain corresponding Pāli concepts. Thus, referring to the verbal

repertoire and style of spiritual, religious, and mainstream academic expression and writing of the target language and culture, could possibly prove to be a source of help to a translator of Pāli literature. But even here, we will have to remain cautious in the case this repertoire of vocabulary may be accessible only to a tight circle of experienced readers in the target language, just as [we!] are in the case of the original Pāli or its “hybridised” English translations.

Now I wish to turn to another important feature of Pāli literature that has proven to be persistently problematic, that of “non-consistency”. Above I have spoken of a problem of “non-exactness”, which is simply that of having many meanings in a single word; “non-consistency” on the other hand is a problem of having multiple words which seem to have more or less the exact same meaning, and which is often a cause of confusion due to the presumption that different words *should* carry different meanings. This presumption likewise comes from the culture and education which emphasise precision and exactness of speech, and which is again at odds with Pāli usage. This is a problem not only for translators, but perhaps even to a higher degree to those highly interested readers who, perhaps doubtful about translations, seek to investigate the original Pāli on the lexical level and end up only becoming more perplexed!

To those who are unfamiliar with the linguistic situation in the time and place of Buddha’s rising, they may fail to attribute the multiplicity of expressions, appellations, and terms which describe more or less the exact same idea across the Pāli texts, to the fact that several languages and several varieties of the same language existed and coexisted then and there in the sphere of Buddha’s activity and up until the time when His teachings were finally committed to writing in Pāli (Norman pp.62-74). An expression which may effectively convey an idea or phenomenon which the Buddha or his disciples were teaching in one locality, may fail completely to convey the same idea in another locality which may be even adjacent to it! An expression which may effectively convey an idea in one time, may fail in another time which may be even close to it! An expression which may effectively convey an idea in one situation, may fail in another situation which may be even similar to it! And so forth! Though there is in the Dhamma to which the Buddha had awakened an incredibly unbreakable intrinsic logic and consistency (*dhammasuddhammata*), the Buddha was not constructing an edifice of abstract philosophical thought; and the fact that several expressions exist which point at the same concept or phenomenon across the text does not mean that this happened due to a deliberate attempt at a hair-splitting capture of the subtlest and most minute nuances of meaning, nor due to the natural existence of such over-detailed-ness in neither the abstract content being described, nor the social usage of these linguistic varieties and in such an ancient Indian context and time when, notably, “writing” was clearly not used to document the teachings of any *samana*, and “talking” was then the only way through which knowledge and wisdom were transmitted and exchanged (and indeed, we have the Pāli “vāceti” meaning “to teach” from the root \sqrt{vac} = “to speak”). Thus, the great majority of Pāli synonyms have no minutely specific defined meanings and are often quite comfortably interchangeable, and it is not possible to suggest otherwise without at first being in possession of substantial knowledge regarding the origin and evolution of the great variety of synonyms that we find retained in what otherwise seems to be the linguistic melting-pot of Pāli!

But one needn't really embark on such an arduous search; for the Pāli text as it exists today readily reveals what kind of teacher, and proclaimer of truth, the Buddha was. He attends to the person(s) and situation(s) at hand, and responds with awe-inspiring intuitive fitness and flexibility to each according to its unique needs; seeking the benefit of listeners, seeking to be convincing, seeking to arouse admiration, inspiration, and faith in their hearts, and in the best possible way which will *work out for them*. He speaks that which is appealing, inviting, persuading and intriguing to their ears, and to their *unique* ears; and to accomplish this the Buddha often utilises the listeners' own thought and language rather than give a standard answer with an abstractly "correct" language. It is evident that no such compulsive heed was given to verbal consistency in the mouth of the Buddha Himself (according to what we find recorded in the Suttapitaka), rather it is the opposite: we find the Buddha manipulating language *effectively* rather than consistently: just by answering a question that is being put to Him, He will demonstrate and teach through the answer how words and concepts are not always or necessarily married in harmony, and He will do so not by saying anything about language itself, but simply by resolving to the questioner's own usage of language to convey the answer in the most effective way, that is, in a way which will facilitate and simplify comprehension and understanding. There was no one right way of expressing any concept, there were only effective and ineffective ways, that is, ways which succeeded or failed in conveying concepts, and that, as in any occasion of communication, depended not only on the speaker's verbal culture and behaviour, but also those of the listener. It is also for this reason that in the preceding section I have emphasised the importance of paying extra attention and being more devoted to the target language and its culture in the case of translating Dhamma, and it is noteworthy that, according to Theravada monastic rules (Cullavagga 5.33.1), the Buddha had allowed the transmission of Dhamma in whatever language and dialect the speaker or listener knew, and at the same time prohibited its codification in any metrical or Vedic-like form.

It is evident that this flexible and dynamic verbal attitude is what the Buddha Himself believed to be the best way for others to understand His teachings! That is to say, if this was the manner which Buddha himself found to be most effective in conveying his teachings, I believe that the Buddha would want us today to understand and teach and translate his Teachings with the same intuitive fitness and flexibility he once clearly employed, and that he would not want us to relate to His recorded Teachings in such a way as to endeavour to hammer home every expression and term we find in Pāli as if it retained some extra-specific hidden meaning that is now lost, and that we can uncover only through the exercise of analytic lexical tricks! This would reflect itself in the work of a translator precisely through the absence of "ambiguity", and through the skill of making extensive use of such accessible and readily graspable expressions and terms in the target language which *effectively* convey the "intended" rather than lexical meaning of the original Pāli, especially in those manifold occasions where it is describing phenomena and experiences that are unfamiliar to the lexical repertoire and intellectual experience of the target language and culture.

There are less significant problematic issues with Pāli literature other than those mentioned above, related mostly to the following: (1) The impact of oral memorisation on the written text (excessive repetition of references and stock phrases and paragraphs). (2) The existence of chronological layers of "composition and narration", ranging from the "early" to the "late", each

with its distinct literary and intellectual features. (3) The fact that the “character” and “tone” of first-person speech in the text is not so readily discernable in the original Pāli.

Where the first problem is much more easily identifiable and manageable (though it is rarely managed!), and the second problem is [generally speaking] quite subtle and of mostly unnoticeable effect – the third problem however has shown itself vividly in many translations where we find the “voice” of first-person speech in the Suttas, and most importantly that of the Buddha, lacking the character and the resonance which exists, in subtle ways, in the original Pāli! The evidence of this can be easily found in how the Buddha sounds quite markedly different across the different translations, and in some translations, I contend, the tonal character of Buddha is nearly entirely missing, and the text sounds just as if it is only “reporting” (rather than reflecting) what the Buddha had said!

This problem of “tone” in translations is prominent, and on the one hand it may be caused by the absence of “auditory experience” on the part of the reader or translator, that is, we haven’t “listened” to Pāli long enough and therefore have difficulty discerning *with the ears* the auditory qualities of the speech that we examine with the eyes (and in this area, we have much to learn from fluent Sri Lankan and Burmese readers). But on the other hand, it may also be due to it being a unique feature of Pāli “usage”, which naturally inclines to “muffle” such kind of emotive verbal expressiveness which otherwise prevails quite visibly (or rather loudly) in other languages, including *literary* ones such as Classical Arabic. The causes of this are interesting to me but I do not have the extensive knowledge of Indic languages with which to venture further in speculating about possible generalisable root causes. Investigating such concerns requires more thorough and rigorous study of the corresponding linguistics and comparative literature, which is beyond my capacity; but it is highly possible that Pāli literature does away with these features of verbal expressiveness (such which would accentuate the “tone” and “character” of speakers) in order to emphasise other literary features which are indeed strikingly visible and consistent in Pāli literature: those of clarity and conciseness, and of a certain measure of intuitive and subtle poeticness which I have addressed above in some detail.

It remains to be the case though, that translators may and do differ among themselves in their appreciation even of the tone and character of speakers, and particularly those of Buddha, as the original Pāli does indeed express little of these features, and thereby allows for an unusually wider margin of interpretation of them; which apparently has led some translators to presume that no such margin exists and no interpretive effort is needed in this area, and that no particular tone or character of Buddha exists or is worthy of being reflected in the target language apart from that which readily and strictly manifest in the original Pāli, and which serves as a sufficient form of expressiveness there [though not necessarily, or at all, in the target language?!]. At the same time, the translator is so absorbed in handling “meaning” that he is often unaware of the ramifications of his lexical choices and preferences on *stylistic* features. Literal, over-complicated, or over-simplified approaches to the text (in terms of meaning) almost always unintentionally bestow a certain character and tone on the Buddha as a speaker, and (with Rhys Davids as a clear exception here) there are no signs that the various translators are concerned, or even aware, of the importance of such dimensions in their translations, and of the compromises they might occasionally have to make in the area of “meaning” in order to accommodate such important considerations of style. This problem appears like daylight in translations into both

classical and vernacular Arabic, where over-attention to meaning alone yields catastrophic results and brings utter destruction upon how everything “sounds”, which soon becomes a concern that is of equal importance to what everything “means”. The task therefore can sometimes, and quite often, be twofold!

I want to say few words about the study and understanding of Pāli literature outside of the West, in Sri Lanka and South East Asia, and particularly in Myanmar. Because we (non-Asians) are mostly focused on “English”, being the language that most of us know, we may be quite totally unaware of the significant contributions done by Asian scholars in this field, being written in either Burmese or Sinhalese (I’m afraid I personally don’t know much about scholarship of Pāli literature in other Asian countries). There is indeed a great wealth of knowledge about Pāli literature in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, much of which is inherited from medieval times and, according to their own accounts, goes back in its origination even to the glorious time when Buddha Himself was still living upon this earth. Though there is much that is of the nature of the legendary and epic that is being mixed along with this valuable accumulation of knowledge, along with a somewhat stern adherence (and reverence) to medieval commentarial authors and texts which may be to some extent at odds with Western or non-Asian critical and analytic attitudes – nevertheless, I came to learn through numerous occasions now, that there is in this Asian knowledge a remarkable and impressive kind and degree of intimate understanding of the Pāli language and of the various subtle ideas and connotations that are retained in Pāli words, phrases, and references. And in Myanmar, for example, there is an evident understanding and appreciation of Pāli *as a literature*, that is, as a text that contains more than just factual information about Doctrine and Practice, but also features of poeticness and beauty on both levels of content and language; a dimension which is rarely, if ever, discerned or appreciated by Western translators and researchers. And it was in Myanmar that I first came directly in contact with the attitude where, the presence of two or more possible interpretations of a text, based on two or more directions of etymological or grammatical analysis, was viewed as something to be celebrated rather than regretted! That a word or phrase could have quite different meaning(s) meant that this is a text which will not fail in being appealing to different kinds of ears! The same story applies to Sri Lankan traditions, and the connections are generally intimate on various levels between both Burmese and Sri Lankan Buddhist history and traditions.

It remains to be said, however, that the English Sutta translations done by Asian translators (including those done by Venerable Acharya Buddharakkhita of Bangalore, India) have mostly followed closely in the same literal and strict style that we find already established in translations done by Westerners. However for reference’s sake, there has been a number of not very well-known English translations of many books from all three translated by several Burmese translators (aside from those published by the Pāli Text Society), such as “U Ko Lay” (who is also the author of a popular English booklet titled “Guide to Tipitaka”), “U Htin Fatt” (translator of entire sections from various Nikayas of the Suttapitaka), and “U Kyaw Khine” (translator of the “Dhammasangani” of the Abhidhamma), among several other translators.

In this final part of this paper I wish to reemphasise some of the most important conclusions that I have already mentioned in brief above. There is a problem of understanding in the situation where criticisms to translations of Pāli literature have been so far mostly made by experts in Indic linguistics and centered around linguistic concerns; and an equal problem in thinking that expertise in language is the solution to our translation troubles (for all I know, the translations of K. R. Norman, a Pāli expert who promotes this view, are themselves lacking in various respects!). It is surprising that, even in academic circles, there is still a visible lag in understanding that translation is an entire thing in itself, it is “it’s own field”, and it has now been taught and studied as such in several academic circles, though it continues to be itself entirely a field of “practice”. But the matter is not so complex as to defy understanding, and we know this from the long history of the practice of translation, and from contemplating and examining those great translations that were produced throughout the history of that practice, where translators of some exceptional talent have sometimes succeeded in producing translations that matched, or even exceeded, the glamour and genius of original works! Definitely proficiency and mastery over the languages involved will always be a highly relevant factor, but it certainly isn’t the only one (nor always the most important!). Far more significant than language is the mastery over the “subject” to which language gives expression, and the extent by which a translator has genuinely absorbed it in its entirety or to its farthest possible extent. And it is evident in those outstanding translations of exceptional genius that the translator reaches a level of confidence, even certitude, in his understanding and appreciation of the original work and of its significance and essence, to the extent that we do not find any trace of “confusion” or “hesitation” in the kind of effort he employs in producing the translation, nor even discern any “exertion” or “struggle” of any kind in the translated text! Rather the opposite: that which makes the translation so perfect is that it does not feel or sound like a translation of an original work – the reader forgets that he’s reading a translation! The translator here does not so skillfully reproduce the original work by “imitating” it, but by absorbing its essence and embracing the kind and level of “inspiration” that was associated with the process of its original makeup. This leads to the third condition which makes up a good translation: the inspiration, the talent, the skill, and the experience, which will allow the translator to re-express in the target language what he has absorbed and loved in the original work, and without which he will only be operating in a fashion that is no longer dissimilar from that followed by the increasingly “correct” AI translators! Hence, there are three requirements for any good translation: knowledge of language, absorbing the subject (and its literary features), and translation talent and experience.

To think that dry “knowledge” is all that is needed in order for one to embark on translation; that is in fact a novel fallacy! But it has been known for a very long time now, that there is much of the inspiration and spirit of the artist, and of his longing and agitation, and certitude and satisfaction too, in the practice of translation! And this being especially the case when what’s being translated is more than a textbook on plumbery or any such like thing. And what have we before us here? The Buddha Dhamma! Such psychology and philosophy of mind the like of which there is none in the whole world – such experiential path of practice, of renunciation, of meditation, of contemplation, and of the superb exercise of attention and awareness. It is precisely such a thing that renders translation of Buddhist texts exceedingly difficult; that even if we find that rare individual with perfect linguistic capacities [*and*] superb natural talent and skill in the art of translation – he still needs to have some experiential access to Dhamma, one way or another, beyond the mere conceptual understanding (or misunderstanding!) of it.

The problem here is the exact opposite of that of language: for where there is evidently no one right way of using expressions and concepts; the margin of freedom in the interpretation of Dhamma and Magga (Doctrine and Practice) is much more limited. And the problem is not only that this right understanding of Dhamma develops only through experience, but moreover, it develops *gradually and by degrees*, precisely because it is an experiential and intuitive understanding (which is what *pañña* is!). It is in every way unlike that of the simple and mere acquisition of information which is acquired whole and once and for all. What this means is that even a devoted, diligent, and faithful practitioner and applier of the Buddha's Teachings, even him and him in particular, will know better than others, that a fuller understanding of what the Buddha describes, and which is retained in the text, is yet to be realised a step or two further ahead along the path of practice and experience, and that therefore, any interpretation done now (with whatever excellent command of Pāli), will be in certain respects (and in the most significant respects, those of experience) deficient in comparison to an interpretation done later, when one's practice and understanding have evolved further – or in comparison to the interpretation of another who, though may be much less proficient in Pāli, yet is much more advanced along the Path of practice and is already endowed with a first hand, intuitive and direct grasp of these subtle experiential realities that are described in fixed words in the Pāli text.

This points to the role of “interpretation” in the work of a translator, and which features so vividly in the case of translating Dhamma as the most important and decisive element in either eliminating or causing ambiguity and obscurity in the translated text, far more than what the lexical dimension contributes. For if the translator has no sufficient access to the essence of such realities which can be understood fully, sufficiently, or at all, only through an extent or another of direct experience; it will then matter not much how he handles or approaches the various lexical complexities discussed above. For example, it is only a direct experience of “nibbida” that will enable a translator to freely and confidently leap beyond the strict lexical connotations and realise with certainty that it does not *intend* to refer to any “disgust” or “revulsion”, or any other such aversive state, but rather refers to the psychological state of “disinterest”, “disenchantment”, “estrangement” or “alienation”, particularly in relation to objects or experiences which were previously intimate, loved, craved, and so forth. “Nibbida” is merely the “end” of these states of craving and attachment but does not introduce any additional aversive states; and there is no way to learn these facts clearly and certainly independently from direct experience, when the glow and warmth of a craved object, are extinguished, and nothing remains but the object, as it is and without any good or bad qualities, “it”, along only with a sober and dispassionate recognition of its conditionality, unreliability, proximity to death, along with its eventual dissolution and decay.

If one was to rely for his understanding of “nibbida” on etymological examination alone, one would have never even thought once that there is anything wrong with such translations as “disgust” or “revulsion”, and more over, when a sincere practitioner objects to these understandings, the linguist would then exclaim: “But why would an aversion-laden word be used to describe a non-aversive experience?” And the truth is that we don't really know! There can be several reasons, most notably the possible traditional or pre-established usage of “nibbida” in the verbal culture in which the Buddha was teaching, and whether or not it then had any aversive connotations. Indeed there is no particular evidence of a distinct or systemic lexical creativity or innovation that we can trace in Pāli literature, except precisely in the novel

employment of old terms that were already in use now to convey new Buddhist meanings (“*āsava*” seems to be another example of this). And as mentioned earlier, it seems quite clear that the Buddha would select from the linguistic pool in which He lived whatever expression that “worked out” to convey the intended meaning instead of using abstract or “correct” ones; a practical and pragmatic attitude which definitely downplays any emphasis on linguistic creativity (so much unlike “Stoic” attitudes regarding language-usage for example, and which stimulated a remarkable linguistic creativity and innovation in the ancient Greek language). Thus we can identify in Pāli a number of spiritual or psychological expressions which we know were already in use before the Buddha’s rising, belonging to both Jain and Brahmanic lexical repertoires; most notably “nibbāna”, which came to refer to the very stereotypical goal of Theravada Buddhism.

Aside from “nibbida” there are several other examples which clearly show the decisive role of “experiential knowledge” in developing a true understanding of the essence of certain Pāli terms: “Sanvega” is another such word, which continues to be void of any vibrant meaning until one has finally experienced it. And there is “bhava”, an interesting and important example, because though it seems entirely *ideational* or conceptual, yet it does have an incredibly profound experiential dimension, the successive layers of which could be uncovered only through sustained practice. Generally speaking, nearly every concept or idea in Pāli has an *experiential* dimension to it, and sometimes it helps a lot to reflect that dimension in translations, though it may be not explicitly mentioned in the original Pāli. By reflecting this experiential dimension of any subtle abstract Pāli word, the translator is presenting to the reader something that he can readily and easily understand and relate to, because any reader can much more easily match an experience he reads about with one that he himself, more or less, exactly or approximately, has once before experienced, than to intuit, imagine, or rationalise the reality of that experience, through reading an abstract ideational or conceptual representation of it. Such would be the difference between saying “the aggregate of form affected by clinging”, and saying “relating emotionally to all that the body experiences”!

Thus, the extent by which a translator’s work is truly representative of what the Pāli text is referring to (and intends to refer to), is equally proportional to the extent by which that translator experiences these words in his body and heart as he lives! And vice versa: The extent by which his work is not necessarily representative of what the Pāli text is referring to is equally proportional to the extent by which he does not experience it as he lives, but conceptualises and rationalises it only as he thinks!

In this way, in order to render the translated text comprehensible and accessible to the average reader, it will not suffice to “simplify” the original, as if the reason behind the ambiguity of translations is their over-complexity! Except for rare occasions, there is no prominent problem of “complexity” in Pāli literature in order to attempt to solve it by simplification; this is a big misunderstanding! And there is a very serious problem with the notion that the average reader is an intellectual infant that needs to be fed the Dhamma with a spoon inserted into his mumbling mouth! A Dhamma that *sounds* that way is not the Dhamma spoken by the Buddha! And the translated text loses its vitality and appeal to the average reader also when it becomes devoid of depth and colour and intriguing trails, on both the intellectual and verbal levels. The problem is that, for very natural reasons, a genuine and penetrating understanding of Dhamma is not something that comes to anyone readily or easily, and if one was to translate or teach Dhamma

before reaching a sufficient level of understanding oneself, over-complexity or simplification will arise only as a result of the “perplexity” which is the property of the translator alone, but neither that of the Dhamma itself nor of its expression in Pāli. And indeed, whenever the translated text seems either overly analytic or flatly simple, in either case, one may quite confidently conclude that this is no longer the Buddha talking! And even in those Suttas that are attributed to Venerable Sāriputta, I do believe that their occasional complexity does not go beyond certain terms and expressions, which are occasionally used in Pāli to break down our seemingly holistic and eventful experience of consciousness, into smaller elements and processes, so that we may be better able to develop a clearer understanding of it. The text will be comprehensible and accessible to the average reader only when the translator does what the Buddha Himself used to do: to neither complicate nor simplify, but only to express what one has truly experienced and understood, first-hand, with such words and manner of language usage that correspond in the best possible way to the verbal experience and culture of the listener.

But none of these various problematic issues discussed in this paper should dissuade us from experimenting with and making further efforts in the translation of Pāli literature (and we wouldn’t have gone so far, even in our observations and criticisms of the challenges associated with Pāli literature and its translation, without the production of those translations by dedicated translators in the first place!) – it is only that being aware of these challenges contributes very positively to our efforts, in that they make us much more able to recognise and be self-conscious of our options and opportunities, our handy tools as translators, and also of our handicaps and limitations, and to accept that all that we can achieve will be within the confines of those limitations.

What will always remain certain is that this Buddha-Dhamma is incredibly profound, and that even an excellent, incomparable translation, or proficiency in reading the original Pāli itself, will not suffice alone for us to fully grasp its intuitive depth and transcendental truth. Only through putting to practice that much which we have thus far understood, that we can at all glimpse, bit by bit, step after another, of the transcendental purity, freedom, peace, and gnosis, of Buddha. The text itself describes Dhamma as something that is “self-evident” (sanditthika) and “experienceable” (vedita) right here and right now – but to whom is it so?!

* * *