Freeing Buddhism from words[1]

One of the many reasons that the Buddha did not arise in China or in western Europe (despite great advances in civilization) is probably because of their respective languages. The language we use to experience and express Buddhism often profoundly or subtly, affects, even changes, the intended message. In significant ways, religious messages — especially as we have them today – are little different from commercial advertisements. Our essential task, then, is to free the message from the medium.[2]

Chinese, for example, is a pictographic language. As such, it tends to rigidly fix ideas and meanings with the strokes of the written or printed form. Chinese scholars and speakers often pride themselves in analysing the Chinese character, often down to every stroke and dot. In fact, the traditional Chinese deeply respect, even worship, the Chinese word, as evident from their home shrines.

Understandably, Chinese philosophy tends to be profoundly word-based, or the meanings come from the words themselves. The word *is* the thing; the name is the thing named.[3] When Buddhism arrived in China, and its texts were translated in Chinese, what precious little we have of the historical Buddha's teachings are to a great extent preserved only in the first two volumes of the 100-volume Chinese Tripiṭaka, the most used of which is the Taisho Shinsu Daizokyo.[4] The rest of the volumes are Chinese translations of post-Buddha works, and original Chinese works, many of which deal with traditions that are more Chinese than they are Buddhist.

The English language, being alphabetic, works by putting together units of basic sounds and senses to form meanings and ideas. For example, we have phonemes or basic distinct sound units that distinguish one word from another (eg, p, b, d, and t in the words *pad*, *pat*, *bad* and *bat*; which also helps us know the difference between *say* and *said*).

Chinese have tonemes, basic tonal units of the same sound. For example, the character 妈 (pronounced *mā*, high level pitch) means "mother," 麻 (*má*, rising pitch) means "hemp," 马 (*mǎ*, falling then rising) means "horse," 骂 (*mà*, falling) means "scold," and 吗 (*ma*, neutral tone) is an interrogative particle. This makes Chinese tonally more versatile, but this can also cause significant problems when a translator mishears the text reader. This happened often enough in the ancient Chinese translations of Buddhist texts.[5]

---

[1] This is a theme from **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, SD 40b, 2nd rev ed 2012.

[2] A vital question we must ask ourselves when we are attracted to Buddhism, or any religion, is whether we are attracted to the teacher (the person) or the teaching (the way). If we fall for the teacher, we are likely fall into a guru cult; if we follow the teaching that is wholesome, we are safely practising self-reliance towards self-liberation.

[3] According to the early Buddhist teaching of non-self, it is just the reverse: the word is *not* the thing; the name is not the thing named. See **Memes**, SD 26.3 (5.1.2.5) and Reflection, **Words are drugs**, R170, 2011.

[4] Originally published in Tokyo between 1924 and 1934. There are a number of other Chinese Buddhist canons and supplements, but sharing more or less the same East Asian Buddhist literature.

[5] See Daniel Boucher, "Gandhāri and the early Chinese Buddhist translations reconsidered: The case of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 118,4 Oct-Dec 1998:472-506. http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-EPT/daniel.htm.

Then, there are morphemes, a basic meaningful unit that cannot be further divided (eg, "in," "come," "-ing," forming "coming," "income," and "incoming"). Every English word comprises one or more morphemes giving it its grammatical function. For example, the -s in *cats* indicates that it is plural; and in *eats* indicates it is the 3rd person singular.

Morphemes, then, are useful in expressing the time, number and other grammatical functions, making English more versatile and accurate in the translation of Pali words into English. Another great advantage is that English belongs to the same family of languages as Pali and Sanskrit, the Indo-European language family (which includes the major language families of Europe and western Asia).

English – and probably other west European languages, too – have one major difficulty: their words tend to be narrow and exacting in defining early Buddhist terms. Such Buddhist terms tend to be polysemic and flexible in their usage, since they are tools for breaking and transcending the limits of language, so that we can see directly into true reality. However, if we are willing and able to work around this difficulty, it will expedite our understanding of early Buddhism. In other words, it would then be naturally easier for someone who knows, say, German, Italian or English to learn Pali, than one who is conversant only in Chinese or any of the East Asian languages.[6]

The fact remains, however, that Chinese – more specifically Mandarin Chinese – is the world's most widely spoken language, and that the Chinese translations of Buddhist texts beginning in the 2nd century contributed significantly to the Chinese language.[7] However, most of these early efforts at translating Buddhist texts served more as a curiosity and diversion for the leisurely elite, but had no impact whatsoever on the common people, who were mostly illiterate. Over the centuries, especially during the Song dynasty (960-1279), Buddhism *itself* had clearly and practically been "translated" into Chinese.

For the proudly ethnic Chinese to be able to accept a "foreign" religion, it must be sinicized – become Chinese. In fact, Chinese Buddhist ethics may have an Indian skin, but underneath runs the blood and bones of Confucianism. Chinese Buddhist philosophy is profoundly shaped and driven by *philosophical* Daoism, which leaves an open door to its more popular twin, *religious* Daoism, with its loud rituals and superstitions. Buddhism in China has become a new Chinese religion in its own right, very often different from its Indian sources.

The influences of Daoism and Confucianism on Chinese Buddhism are subtle, yet profound and pervasive. Even today, we clearly see these influences the moment we enter a Chinese monastery or temple. In simple, yet real, terms, Daoist influence on Buddhism gives it a high tolerance for what is imaginative, supernatural and superstitious. The Confucianist influence conditions the follower of Chinese Buddhism to respect hierarchy, status and authority, and the notion that "face" is the real truth.[8]

Almost all of the Buddhist texts translated into Chinese were *philosophical* (eg, the Perfection of Wisdom texts), or *legalistic* (the Vinayas), or *mythical* (the Kṣitigarbha

---

[6] On the polysemy of many Pali terms, see SD 1.1 (4.4.5) & SD 10.16 (1.3.1).
[7] See **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b.2 (2.3.3-2.3.4 & 2.7).
[8] See Reflection, "Words are drugs," R170, 2011; "Kind of right," R389 2015.

Sutras), or *polemical* (the Lotus Sutra). With the sidelining (even denigration) of early Buddhist or "inferior" (*hīna,yāna*) teachings and meditation—and with the dominant influence of indigenous philosophies and beliefs— the Buddhism that grew on Chinese soil and filled the Chinese mind was effectively a *Chinese* religion. This race-based faith rejects significant aspects of the historical Buddha and early Buddhism, and seems to be grounded in blind faith and brazen materialism.

Whalen Lai, in his *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* entry, "Buddhism in China: A historical survey," writes: "For the Han Chinese, the doctrine of karmic rebirth entailed the transmigration of the soul—a presumption they could not do away with even when they accepted the doctrine of emptiness. Since nirvana was seen as a return to a pure origin, it was believed to be achieved by discarding the defilements. Refining one's inner self was thought to be a process of attaining a sublime *shen* (spirit) that would realize nirvanic immortality or nondeath." (2002:10)[9]

Above all, the Chinese mostly looked to Buddhism for answers to questions that they found relevant. They approached Chinese translations of Buddhist texts *not so much as glosses on the Indic originals*, "but as valuable resources that addressed their own immediate conceptual, social, and existential concerns. Accordingly, in order to understand the answers they found, we must first deduce the questions they were asking, questions, whose historical, linguistic, and conceptual genealogy was largely Chinese." (R Sharf 2002:12).[10]

Amongst our questions now are: Why does Chinese Buddhism sideline the historical Buddha and reject early Buddhism? Why did Buddhism become Chinese? What are the real effects of Chinese Buddhism upon its followers, especially as a community? How will Chinese Buddhism identify and solve the problems of materialism and secularism rampant amongst its clergy?

If "Chinese," "Japanese," "Sinhalese," "Burmese" or "Thai" comes before "Buddhism," then, *race* comes before Dharma. Is this really the Buddhism of the Buddha? This will, in significant ways, impede wholesome Buddhist change amongst its followers, when Buddhism is useful only in reinforcing Chineseness than bringing self-enlightenment.

The racist tide and bigotry against the historical Buddha and early Buddhism is, oddly enough, rising amongst ethnic Buddhists in our own times, when the major world religions are working together towards greater dialogue and global humanity. We need to respect the Buddha: accept him as he is, so that we can understand the Dharma as it really is, and so awaken to true reality.

R462 Revisioning Buddhism 158
[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]
Piya Tan ©2016 rev

---

[9] Whalen Lai, "Buddhism in China: A historical survey," in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy,* ed A S Cua, London & NY, 2003, digital 2008:7-19. http://cw.routledge.com/ref/chinesephil/Buddhism.pdf. See also Jungnok Park, *How Buddhism Acquired a Soul on the Way to China,* Oxford Center for Buddhist Studies Monographs. Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2012. Review.

[10] Robert Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A reading of the Treasure Store Treatise.* Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 14. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.