

Language limits

How the Buddha frees us from language

[Previously published as fb190628 piya]

[This reflection is exploratory and controversial; I may be wrong at some points or most of them. Your responses are welcome.]

Two of the most ancient living languages of the world are those of Chinese and of India. Part of this reflection is about why "Chinese" is used here instead of "of China." The Chinese language has a way of unifying people, while the languages "of India" tend to diversity Indians. This is not "totally" true, but real enough to be seen.

It's interesting that the Buddha should have arisen in India, teaching in Indian dialects, rather than teaching the Dhamma in Chinese. Indian languages (such as Pali), like English, are agglutinative (like Lego pieces) and alphabetical, giving it great versatility in explaining and conveying the subtle workings of the mind for seeing and understanding true reality directly.

Chinese is versatile in its own way, by creating new pictographs or symbols for ideas and sounds. However, such pictographs preserve some preconceived notions that have fixed meanings and fixed purposes (or agenda). Even when different character elements are put together to create new words or sounds, their meanings are still limited by preconceptions. Indeed, the essential function of the Chinese character is to preserve preconceptions, so that the speaker can only work or play with them at best and transmit them.

Such a language serves very well to convey worldly realities but is simply handicapped in giving rise to the likes of Greek philosophy or Indian religion. The effect of such a hypostatic language—one that works on cultural and psychological "essences"—must end up making Buddhism more Chinese than Buddhist.

My point is not that any language is better than another; but rather that certain languages are better at expressing certain aspects of human culture and learning in certain ways. What is expressed here is merely exploratory. Perhaps the developments here are historical accidents. Perhaps there are better explanations for them. This is one of the possible explanations.

Pali polysemy

The fact that the world's greatest philosophies and sciences have arisen in the west, or rather in the western languages, is because of the versatility of the Indo-European languages, to which English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and almost all of the west European languages belong. And also Pali, Sanskrit and the modern Indian languages.

It's difficult to explain such broad developments by colonization alone. Colonization only imposed them upon us. But the colonizers, too, were transformed by the languages they hear amongst the colonized. When we keep hearing a language long enough, we must be somehow transformed by it, too.

Such languages can be very versatile when expressing subtle concepts beyond the physical and worldly. **Pali**, however, unlike any of these modern west European languages, tends to be less technical and more polysemic (having more than one meaning).

The word **Dhamma**, for example, can mean “thing,” “thought,” “quality,” “virtue,” “truth,” “teaching,” “a rule,” just to list a few of its better known meanings and usages. Hence, to fully understand the Pali texts, we have to tease out their contexts.¹

Dhamma words

Early Buddhism has a rich vocabulary of words relating to the mind, unparalleled by any other language. Even the Greek language up to the Buddha’s times had no word for “consciousness,” except for a variety of terms and expressions showing relationships to the self, to moral judgement, or to perception.

While modern experts are still struggling with the nature of consciousness and are only just beginning to taste the rich flavour of Buddhist meditation, the Pali text routinely discuss *anusaya* (unconscious tendencies), *viññāṇa* (consciousness), *saññā* (perception), *saṅkhārā* (mental formations) and *papañca* (mental proliferation). Except perhaps for *viññāṇa*, “consciousness,” there is really no fixed translations of the other terms that all the experts can agree to.

The reason for such disagreement is clear enough: they have not fully or really experienced what the Buddha is talking about. Up to the end of the 20th century, western scholarship diligently worked with the notion that any ancient text can be translated into English or some modern western language. Any informed Buddhist today reading a volume of the *Nikāyas* translated in 19th-century English can only admire at the wonder, rather than the wisdom, with which these texts were translated. Their language is usually brilliant, but their content is often uncomfortable for the informed.

The wonder of the peerlessly rich array of Pali mind terms is accentuated by the fact that these are neither fiat of dogma nor tenets of faith, but terms that any open-minded lover of learning can examine for his profound profit in the better understanding of the human mind and spirituality. This alone goes beyond the most powerful or enigmatic of dogmas spawned by any religion for its own benefit.

Traduttore, traditore

Even translating from one European language to another can be tricky. The Italian phrase, *Traduttore, traditore*, “The translator is a traitor,” was first applied to the French by irate Italians who felt that many French-language translations of Dante betrayed either the beauty or the accuracy of his works.

Some magisterial western scholars had even said that the Pali texts, even the verse, lacked the rich beauty of western religious scripture. It’s like their comparing Shakespeare in

¹ See “Can we know Buddhism?” R629.

English to the Theragāthā in Pali: their respective bias is in their own eyes.

When I was living as a monk in Thailand, I was shown how more beautiful Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice is in Thai than it is in English. One way to see this is that the wealth of the Thai language is able to better even the best that the English work has mustered--as far as language goes.

Yet the true strength of Pali literature is in its use of simple words to preserve and propagate the most profound understanding of the mind, human experience and spirituality. In this, Pali is unparalleled, even by Buddhist Sanskrit works.

If the Pali works are the bright idyllic countryside, the later works are like dark clouded cities with high-risers and clogged traffic. Understandably, we find a bigger crowd in the latter. Pali is for those who love the inner space.

Unmeeting parallels

Take the conception of “**experience**,” for example. In English, generally, as verbs, “experience” suggests a passive process, while “experiment” an active involvement. While verbs unite us in action, **nouns** (even with the participle -ing: “experiencing,” “experimenting”) separate us from an experience.

Further, the French, “*expérience*” and “*expérimentation*” are only parallels that do not meet. Thus, if we render “to experiment” as “*expérimenter*” and “to experience” as “*éprouver*” (to experience in the sense of “feel” or “perceive”), *éprouver* connotes a difficulty that is not found in “to experience.” While the French word is more rooted in rationalism, the English is much less framed by rational activity. This abstruse case is just to highlight serious difficulties and subtle nuances we must consider when translating, especially from Pali into English, separated by millennia in time, by the space of culture, and by differences of religious conditioning.

Dhamma experience

The Pali word **paṭisaṃvedeti** is sometimes translated as “experience.” From what we have discussed this translation may work in English, but not in French. “Paṭisaṃvedeti” is resolved as **paṭi-** (suggests a “reactivity”) + **saṃ** (like “con-,” suggesting “togetherness”; or “self,” in the sense of reflexive) + **VID**, to know. Thus, it can be explained as “to fully know something by putting it together for oneself, and reacting or responding to this.”

In other words, we can render “paṭisaṃvedeti” as “to experience, to undergo, to know, to feel” (all this for the one Pali word!). Which English word/s we use here must faithfully reflect the Pali context. We can know the Pali context not merely from grammar, but from what the word in its setting (the context) is trying to convey to us. To get this context right, we must experience the Dhamma. Our accuracy of such a rendition, as a rule, reflects the depth and veracity of our Dhamma experience. Still, how the reader understands our translation is another matter!

Perhaps, it may help to say that translating Pali suttas into English must be based on our understanding the language well, and freeing the Dhamma preserved in it. This can only be done experientially, by our experience of the Buddha Dhamma. Language freezes, the Dhamma frees.

R631 Revisioning Buddhism 244

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2019