

Translating challenges

Translating suttas, the early Buddhist texts, which record the life and teachings of the Buddha, is best done by one person. This way, there will be unity and harmony of method and style. The pioneer translation of the books of the 4 Nikayas by the Pali Text Society was done by various translators, a few of whom shared the translation of a single Nikāya.

The latest translation of the Dīgha Nikāya was completed by Maurice Walshe, but it is not well received by scholars as it lacks the expected academic standards, especially a critical apparatus and notes. Hence, a new translation is still needed for the Dīgha Nikāya.

The latest translations of the Majjhima Nikāya was started by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, a British monk, and completed (with significant revisions) by Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American monk. Bodhi also completed the translations of the Saṃyutta and the Aṅguttara Nikāyas. The new translations were much better than their predecessors due to Bodhi's training as an academic (philosophy) and in the Sinhala monastic tradition.

Bodhi's translations were great commercial successes as his works were well received and went through a number of editions and reprints. Their publishers also received donations from various sources which cut down production costs. I suspect Bodhi received handsome royalties enough to start a foundation, and not surprisingly, he felt compelled to be socially engaged in some kind of meaningful way to use his wealth and inspire others to actively express their compassion.

One of the main setbacks of Bodhi's new translations – as observed by practising Buddhist scholars, such as L S Cousins – is that all the repetitive cycles (*peyyāla*) have been abridged. These cyclic passages, as practitioners well know, are vital reflective passages that help us internalize the Buddha's teachings.¹ This is not so much the translator's fault as it is the constraints of keeping the translation within a convenient single volume – as all Bodhi's translations ended up to be.

Another difficulty Bodhi faces is, by his own admission, his inability to meditate. This would, of course, deprive a monk of a very vital avenue of “feeling” the suttas, which may have prevented him from reading in between the Pali lines for meanings and insights that such words point to. Even amongst the illustrious monastics themselves there are some disagreements, such as regarding how *kāma* should be translated. Helpfully, some such difficulties have been noted in Bodhi's translations.

My Sutta Discovery (SD) series is essentially a labour of love, and the result of a long-term quest for the authentic teachings of the historical Buddha. If I had not started the project, and had come across this new series of Nikāya translations, I probably would not have started on the SD project. Anyway, the SD project started in 2002 and has been going on without a break to date. At the time of writing, I am working on SD 49c, the third part of volume 49, themed on an in-depth study of the Buddha's life. With some volumes having 2-3 parts, we now have a total of some 55 volumes, each averaging 180-200 A4 comb-bound pages.

¹ See *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 4, 1997: 260-280, <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2010/04/cous1.pdf>.

The great advantage of the SD series is that it can take all the space and all the time needed to produce a volume. To date, we have been able to produce at least 4 SD volumes a year. The space allows me to work on all the notes and commentaries needed for the suttas – and there are also SD essays, which examine specific doctrines (such as the hindrances, the aggregates, and the latent tendencies), topics (such as dependent arising, karma and rebirth) and social issues (such as money and monastics, psychology and Buddhism).

From various feedbacks, over the 14 years of SD translation work, the series has been used by monastics as well as the laity, especially in their teaching and personal practices. Scholars have also been using the SD series for their theses and classes, especially as resource materials. It was in anticipation of this that I have tried my best to maintain high academic standards for the series.

We now have a growing global team of proof-readers, for whom reading the SD translations and essays are also a Dharma practice. With proof-reading comes correcting errors and updating the various files. I am especially grateful to various monastics and scholars who have generously given me feedback on some typos and errors. Of course, there are those who have criticized the SD series as being “filled with errors” without apprising me of what they are.

The point is that the SD series is a “living” translation – it will be updated and revised as long as there are new materials and developments related to the suttas and Buddhism. In this sense, the SD series are educational resources for the study of historical Buddhism and its contemporary relevance.

The SD series has reached such a size and range that it can sometimes be difficult to locate a term or comment that had already been explicated. It now needs an **index** – in fact, several indexes. I have started a series of indexes, and working on the first, which is called “Dictionary of Early Buddhism” (DEB), which lists the topics by word and by number. As the occasions arise, I would index an important term or name, and make cross-references as necessary.

Then, there are also indexes of proper names (like the Dictionary of Pali Proper Names), of Sutta titles, and of numerical Dharmas. All these are simply waiting in the computer for me to find the occasions to work with them. Most of us would be able to imagine the tedium of such enterprises – but they have to be done to make the series useful and accessible.

It is not possible for one person to complete the SD project in one life-time, or even within the next 20 years, which would probably be the extent of my life, assuming I am still able to continue to work as I do now. Already, I can feel the burden of age slowing me down, and I’m unable to work as long as I have done before. But surprisingly, working a bit here and a bit there, in between daily chores and rest, the schedule is always fulfilled, and a new SD volume is born.

Of course, there are moments when I felt I should slow down, or even stop altogether. Working alone can be so demanding. In times of translation difficulties, it can be very trying to find the right kind of person to give the proper advice on how to proceed. It is also difficult to find the funds and support to publish the SD series or some form of it – especially the Simplified Sutta Discovery (SSD) series.

Somehow the support comes, the donations arrive, like drops of life, that keep the work and our lay Dharma ministry and our family going. This is possible because of the support and donations from a few (wish we have more) concerned and compassionate Buddhist laity and monastics like yourself.

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

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