

## Translating ourselves

Teasing out the spirit from the words  
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Recently, I tried reading some new translations of the Pali suttas, especially when someone quotes someone else's translations and asks me what it means. Of course, it's easier to understand what we are reading when we have translated it before. Even then, we still need to check our sources for the sake of a clear and precise understanding of the Dharma.

## Number and name

The text or passage is quickly traced (and a lot of time saved) when **the sutta reference** is given. It is good to give at least the "sutta number" (every sutta has a unique number); but sometimes we may give the wrong number. Or, the reference is right, but it is from a different system.

For example, many suttas in Bh Bodhi's translations are different from those of the Pali Text Society's (PTS) Pali texts. Bodhi tries to standardize his sutta numbering by following the Burmese Tipiṭaka numbering. This can be difficult for those who are not familiar with the Burmese texts. Hence, I keep to the PTS numbering, and also given the Burmese numbering at the start of the Sutta Discovery (SD) translations.

For easier reference, then, we should give **both** the sutta number and its **name**. Then, we are more certain which text we are referring to.

## Usefulness of translations

Throughout religious history, translators have shown themselves to be valuable friends and bridges who bring us across from the familiar to understand and enjoy the unfamiliar language of ancient texts. However, we are literally at the mercy of the translators, since we do not really know the host language of the ancient texts.

Then again, knowing what the text says is one thing (scholars can with some diligence work out, for example, what the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian cuneiforms say), but what the Pali texts really mean, or what the Buddha means by them is something only our spiritual experience and maturity can give up. After all, the Pali texts are like a huge computer programme with coded language—not a word or a line is to be missed—to be run and then followed.

## Translating oneself

Hence, knowing some Pali, even the key terms, helps us in finding out what the Buddha is really teaching. However, in most translations, especially the more "original," or the more "self-conscious," translators who try to simplify or over-simplify, or modernize, the passages they translate.

The end-product of such a masterpiece is, of course, an **original** work. What we are reading is no more the Buddha Word, but the translator's own philosophy. It's like Edward Fitzgerald's "translation" of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat: it is a new English work, beautiful as it is.

This, of course, works fine when we adore the translator rather than seeking the truth and freedom of the Buddha Dhamma. When we hold the Dhamma high above even our adorable and most holy teacher, we are likely to learn more than he knows. This is how "green comes from indigo; but is bluer than the plant itself," as the Chinese saying goes. The other alternative—that we must remain stupider than the teacher—does not sound right: it is not right.

### **Pali & suttas**

Ideally, then, we should know Pali and read the ancient suttas in its original texts. Then, it is easier to understand the context, and hence the Buddha's message. Often enough, after reading a Modern Translation, I have to immediately search the Tipitaka to read the original Pali, which always makes better sense than what I am reading in English.

Honestly, I am profoundly biased here. I do not trust everything I read, and I try to read everything on the suttas, even those in Buddhist Hybrid English, and writings on suttas by non-Buddhists. I see this as a moving language of faith—the courage to put into English when the English speakers themselves would not put into our local dialects for us to read. Imagine Shakespeare or Stephen Fry speaking Mandarin Chinese! I suppose this is not as bad as getting a local from the Jurong East wet market to read a verse of Shakespeare or John Gray! Even then, either way, these are phenomenal moments—to see humans reaching out beyond their limits!

### **Translating or new work?**

My point is that translating Pali into English, complete in the spirit and the word, is a very daunting exercise. Perhaps, the way we translate may be restrained by our publishers or sponsors, especially in a **commercial translation**.

Then, we may be compelled or feel justified to crush huge sections of repetitive passages (the peyyāla) into a single paragraph with ellipses ( ... ). Or Procrustes-like, to omit thousands of occurrences of **bhikkhave**, **bhante**, names of noble saints, and other vocatives.

Imagine, removing some passages or bars or even a few notes from Chopin's Nocturne! Should we sell the Dhamma short?

The volume then looks professional nice, and commercially sellable. It's a financial success, and we make millions, especially with all the sponsorships from foundations and donations from pious Penang Buddhists.

## Line numbering

Lately, sadly, my wife tells me that this “neat” look infecting even the staid Chinese Dazang Jing: one of these authorities have removed all the line numberings. It has a really nice lusty look but when we try to locate an unfamiliar Chinese passage, it will take some substantial time. Newbies often just give up here.

Or, we should make the book so **neat and sanitary** to look at that we adore the letters and lose ourselves in the spaces: we are distracted from the actual words. How then can we taste the spirit of the Dhamma?

We may not be able to count the Ganges sand, but the wise ancients had numbered the Tripitaka lines giving us quick access to this ancient wisdom. Lately, even the PTS editions of Pali texts sometimes have line numbers (like in some of the Jataka Commentaries’s Pali). These numbers are like door or cell numbers in a mansion with thousands of rooms. It helps us to quickly and accurately locate the line or passage we need.

## Like mining for diamonds

We know that Bh Bodhi completely and inexplicably omits the **Siamese** Tipitaka in all his translations. I suspect the reason (or one of them) is that the Siamese versions are not well arranged like the Burmese edition or the PTS edition. Or, perhaps, it is difficult to find an easy-to-use Siamese Tipitaka like that of the CSCD (Vipassana Research Institute’s “Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyanā CD) version, which is the most complete and easiest of the digital Tipitakas to use.

In the end, I have resorted to the digital **book version** of the Siamese Tipitaka. These are handy PDFs of the Siamese Tipiṭaka. The Thai PALI characters, because of their simplicity in looks and spelling, can be easily read after a week of memorizing the Thai Pali alphabet (which is easier than the secular Thai).

## Romanization

Anyway, the romanization of the Burmese Tipiṭaka into PDF and CSCD is a great boon to us. I hope we would also romanize and publish (PDFs) of the Sinhala SHB, SLTP and other versions available.

Anyway, I make it a rule to compare at least 4 versions of the Pali texts: the Burmese, the PTS, the Sinhala, the Siamese, and sometimes the Chinese Āgama version. This way, we can decide the best readings, put back any omissions; more often than not, we will be amazed at the concordance amongst the various versions of the Pali Tipiṭaka, the oldest records we have the historical Buddha’s teachings.

## The Buddha is still teaching us

Suffice it to say that translating Pali full time since 2001 has really brought my life, and Ratna’s, such great joy, fulfillment, purpose and direction. These clear and beautiful teachings have helped us understand the wise and virtuous meditation teachers better.

Above all, they have convinced us to **aspire for streamwinning** in this life itself. Since we have all the guides, maps and travelling kits, this is the right time for setting out of this samsaric Zoo for the path!

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

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