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## WHAT LANGUAGE DID THE BUDDHA SPEAK?<sup>1</sup>

Ven. Piyasīlo

Despite the enormous amount of Buddhist texts and extent of research work done on the Buddha and his teachings, no scholar has been able to pinpoint the language or dialect which the Buddha used to preach.<sup>2</sup>

The word 'Pāli' is found only in the Commentaries, not in the Tipiṭaka (PED, s.v. Pali). The Commentaries (e.g. DhA 4, 93, DhA 157) frequently use the word 'Pāli' in the sense of 'canonical text' in contrast to the Aṭṭhakathā (Commentary), and sometimes also in the sense of 'language of the canonical texts'. In the Jātaka Commentary, 'Pāli' often means the Jātaka verses. Winternitz (1972: 603) remarks that curiously the term 'Pāli' is often used at the present day by the country people of Eastern Bengal to denote the verse portions of their prose narratives (Rūpa-Kathā and Gīta-Kathā).

We do not have any definite information as to what language the Buddha himself spoke. Winternitz (1972: 12) says that the Buddha spoke the dialect of his native province Kosala (modern Oudh), and that it was most likely in this same dialect that he first began to proclaim his doctrine. This view is quite tenable because in the sixth century BCE, the Sākya territory of

1 Reprinted from *Unisains Buddhist '79* (Penang) with the kind permission of the Editorial Board.

2 Ed. Attention should be drawn to the seminal contributions to *Die Sprache der ältesten buddhistischen Überlieferung. The Language of the Earliest Buddhist Tradition*, ed. Heinz Bechert, Göttingen 1980, his own subsequent paper, 'Methodological Considerations Concerning the Language of the Earliest Buddhist Tradition', *BSR* 8 (1991), pp.3 19, and Mettananda Bhikkhu, 'What Language Did the Buddha Speak?', 2 parts, *WFB Review* XXVII, 1-2, Bangkok 1990.

Kapilavatthu was subject to Kosala. The Sutta Nipāta (v.405) speaks of the Buddha's birthplace as belonging to the Kosalans, and the Aṅguttara Nikāya (A I 276) mentions Kapilavatthu as being in Kosala. Elsewhere Pasenadi is reported as saying, 'The Blessed One is a Kosalan; I, too, am a Kosalan' (M II 124).

Warder remarks (1970: 206) that we cannot speak of any 'original' language of the Buddhist Canon, nor have any definite information as to what language the Buddha himself spoke. At the most, we can say that the recension (of the Canon) in the language of Magadha might have enjoyed some pre-eminence for the first centuries.

As a literary language Pāli, like all literary languages, developed more or less out of a mixture of dialects. Such a literary language, even if it is a mixture of two different dialects, could only have proceeded out of one certain dialect. This was very likely old Magadhī, so that the tradition which makes Pāli and Magadhī the same, though it is not to be taken literally, has some historical background (Winternitz, 1972: 13).

One should, however, be aware of the fact that during the Buddha's lifetime, Magadha was merely one of numerous rival states. The Buddha taught in it and met its two successive kings (Bimbisāra and Ajātasattu). However, he spent relatively little time in Magadha, teaching in at least half a dozen other states. Buddhism thus spread at first for the most part outside the frontiers of Magadha. It reached the majority of the countries of India before the Magadhan supremacy, and it did so as a strictly non-political and non-worldly organisation. However, in a century and a half the spread of Buddhism was overtaken by the expansion of Magadha (under Asoka), so that for a time hardly a single community of monks could be found outside the frontiers of the empire (Warder, 1970: 207).

There is related in the Vinaya (Vin II 139) an interesting episode about two monks who complained to the Buddha that monks of different origins and status, using their own dialects, were corrupting the word of the Buddha. The two monks, who were brahmins, then requested that the Buddha-word be given in metrical form like the Vedas (that is, in Sanskrit). The Buddha sternly rejected the suggestion, saying that such an innovation would not be conducive towards the conversion of the unconverted nor enhance the faith of the converted. He then gave the classic declaration: 'I allow you, monks, to learn the word of the Buddha each in his own dialect' (*anujānāmi bhikkhave sakāya niruttiyā buddhavacanam pariyāpunitum*. — *ibid.*).

In his Commentary on the Vinaya, however, Buddhaghosa explains the phrase *sakāya niruttiyā* as 'the speech of the Magadhans as spoken by the Buddha' (VinA 1214). This has led a few Western scholars like Geiger (1968: 6f) and Horner (BD V, 194) to translate the same passage to the contrary effect of 'I allow you, monks, to learn the word of the Buddha according to his own dialect (that is, Magadhī, the language used by the Buddha himself)'. If this were the case, argues Winternitz (1972: 602), then we should also expect that not only the translation into Sanskrit, but also the learning of the word of the Buddha in the dialects of the monks of the various districts, would have been forbidden. This, however, cannot be so as the Buddha expressly forbade his teachings to be given in the vedic form declaring it as an act of wrong-doing (*na, bhikkhave, buddhavacanam chandaso āropetabbam; yo āropeyya āpatti dukkatassa*. — Vin II 139).

E.J. Thomas (1949: 253f) explains the above passages differently. He translates *nirutti* as 'grammar' and *chandaso* as 'metre', and makes the Buddha say: 'I order you, monks, to master the word of Buddha (*buddhavacanam*) in its own grammar'. He does not think it possible that *sakāya niruttiyā* can mean 'each in

his own dialect', and believes that the passage in question only contains a prohibition to versify the Canon. Even if this explanation were accepted, argues Winternitz (1972: 603), it is difficult to see why a versification of the word of the Buddha should be detrimental to the propagation of the Doctrine. Moreover, *nirutti* does not mean 'grammar', but 'linguistic expression'; *chandaso* may mean 'metre', just as well as 'Veda'.

That the Buddha permitted the use of one's own dialect in the study of his teaching also accords well with the Arana-vibhanga Sutta (M III 234f, 237), where it is said that the 'middle way' is for one not to insist unduly on his own provincial dialect (*janapada-nirutti*) and at the same time not to diverge from general or recognised language (*janapadaniruttiṃ nābhiniveseyya, samaññāṃ nātidhāveyya*). It is said here that, for instance, a different word is used for 'bowl': *pāti, patta, vittha, sarāva, dhāropa, poṇa, piṣāṭa*, and that each one considers his word is the only correct one, but that in the interest of peace, it is best for each one to use the word which is currently at hand.

Even during his lifetime, the Buddha had disciples coming from many different countries and who spoke, if not completely different languages, at least different dialects. It has been shown by scholars like Lin Li-kouang (1949: 216ff) that the early Buddhists generally adopted the local languages wherever they taught. Their success in spreading the Doctrine and establishing it in many countries of India therefore, says Warder (1970: 206), differed in dialect or language from the earliest times, and we cannot speak of any 'original' language of the Buddhist Canon.

The policy of using local dialects in spreading the Buddha's teaching was followed by Asoka in his famous inscriptions which are found all over India. The Asokan inscriptions were written in two major scripts known as Kharoṣṭhī and Brahmi (and allegedly, Aramaic), using two major dialects, generally called the Eastern

(the standard and official language of Asoka's court) and the Western, both of which allowed local variations (Mookerji, 1962: 246f). Besides, we also have the Prakrit Dhammapada found in Central Asia (Pande, 1974: 11, n.50).

While it is true that, on a general level, the local dialect should be used in the propagation and establishment of the Buddha's teaching, it is vital, on the higher level, that the Pāli texts themselves are the only reliable authority as to their meaning (Warder, 1963: xi). The importance of Pāli is accentuated by the fact that of the recensions of the Canons of the earliest Buddhist schools (of which there were supposed to have been eight by about the first century BCE), we now possess only one complete and intact Canon — the Pāli Canon of the Sthavira-vāda school (Warder, 1970: 6, 14). This Canon is now preserved in Sinhalese, Burmese, Khom, Thai, Japanese, Latin and Devanāgarī alphabets.

The extant Pāli Canon has an extensive exegesis by the Buddhist schools including those written by Buddhist scholars from the South-East Asian countries. These form the basis for the understanding of meaning. We can check their interpretations by seeing whether the schools and individual scholars agree among themselves, and then go back to the Tipiṭaka contexts and see how they work out in the system of what is believed to be the Buddha's language when taken by itself. After all, remarks Warder (1967: 69), in the hope of further reducing the area of uncertainty in the interpretation of the texts, we should continue the great Pāli grammarian Aggavaṃsa's own excellent research into Pāli usage, *nīti sāsanassopakārāya yathābalaṃ amhehi thapitā* (Sd 640): 'rules established by us, according to our ability, for benefit of the teaching'.

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EKOTTARĀGAMA (XXI)

Translated from the Chinese Version by  
Thích Huyền-Vi and Bhikkhu Pāsādika  
in collaboration with Sara Boin-Webb

Ninth Fascicle

Part 18

(Shame and Remorse)

8. 'Thus have I heard. At one time the Buddha was staying, together with a large [number of] bhikṣus, viz. five hundred persons altogether, among the Śākyans at Kapilavastu, in the Nyagrodha Park. Then Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī went to the Exalted One. She bowed down her head at his feet and said to him: [I] hope for a long time the Exalted One will bring the ignorant and deluded to their senses, and may [his] life never be endangered! — Gautamī, responded the Exalted One, such words in regard to the Tathāgata are not appropriate. The Tathāgata [can] prolong his life-span which will not be short, and his life will never be [really] in danger<sup>1</sup>. — Now Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī improvised the following verses:

How [can one] revere him who is foremost, who is unparalleled

In the world? [He] is capable of removing all doubts; that is why

These words [of veneration] are uttered. —

1 Cf. BSR 12, 2 (1995), p.163 f.: 'Since the Tathāgata's body is not reckoned an ordinary body, it is not subject to other people's violence . . .'. As for the Tathāgata's power to prolong his life-span, see D II, 103 f.; E. Waldschmidt (ed.), *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* II (Berlin 1951), 15.10, 15.13 (pp.204, 206): ākāṅkṣamāṇas tathāgataḥ kalpaṃ vā tiṣṭhet kalpāvaśeṣaṃ vā.