

caveat lector

The 125th anniversary of the founding of the Pali Text Society is an occasion for celebration — celebration of the fact of the continued existence of the Society, and of the early work done by T.W. Rhys Davids and his first committee of management (listed as Professor Fausbøll, Dr Oldenberg, Dr Morris, M. Senart) and other contemporaries and successors. All of us who study Pāli or Theravāda Buddhism today stand on the shoulders of those early scholars. We have inherited from them texts, commentaries, translations, dictionaries, grammatical works. Where we are now depends on what they did.

I would like to consider here the next 125 years of the Pali Text Society (PTS). It seems to me that it is time those of us whose main concern is Pāli should pause to think about the direction we should be taking in the twenty-first century.

Let us look at our inheritance. The founder members of the PTS wished “to render accessible to students the rich stores of the earliest Buddhist literature” (*JPTS* 1882, p. vii). The PTS has indeed done that, as the rows of its editions of the Canon and commentaries on my shelves attest. These editions (and the *Pali-English Dictionary* of T.W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede as well as the *Pāli Grammar* of W. Geiger) have been for most of us studying Pāli, I imagine, the gateway to our knowledge, and indeed the field in which we dig. The great majority of those volumes was already there when I began to learn about Pāli forty years ago. This means that much of what I have on those shelves of mine is the product of pioneering work, rather a first draft than the culmination of centuries’ study (as are my Oxford Classical Texts). The situation has been well described by Mr Norman, whose eighty-two years of life and so many years of Pāli scholarship are another cause for celebration, in his article “Pāli philology and the study of Buddhism” (Norman 1990), and his lecture “Buddhism and Philology” (Norman 2006). I can only reiterate his concerns, and try to reinforce his warnings.

The transmission of the texts covers a very long period, but most of our mss are comparatively recent. We can make no confident assumption that what we have is anywhere near the actual Buddhavacana (or indeed Buddhaghosavacana); what we have is the product of centuries of careful copying, careless copying, knowledge, incompetence, inspired emendation and bungling (see von Hinüber 1978). And none of that stopped with the beginning of Western scholarship. Mr Norman's plea for more "philologists" capable of making good new editions of the Canon seems so far to have gone largely unanswered.

In my writing of the PTS *Dictionary of Pāli* (*DOP*), I search for occurrences of each word on a CD-Rom of the Thai edition (S^c) of the Canon and commentaries. This, although I suspect not always accurately transcribed, gives me access to Thai readings, which I can check against the PTS editions (E^c), the Burmese Chaṭṭhasaṅgītipiṭakaṃ printed editions (B^c), and the Sinhalese Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka printed editions (C^c). What has become clear from this process is that the PTS editions have a large number of, at best questionable, at worst, plain wrong, readings.¹ Often these editions are transcriptions of a very few mss, or even of only one; often they follow only one tradition, usually the Sinhalese. Some editors made mistakes because they misread the mss — various characters in the Burmese and Sinhalese scripts can be very easily confused, especially in mss *kha* and *ba*, *ta* and *na*, *bha*, *ha* and *ga*, *pa*, *ya* and *sa*, *va* and *ca* in the Sinhalese script spring immediately to mind. Others made mistakes because they did not know Pāli or Sanskrit well enough (understandably so in the case of Pāli — they were pioneers). The ability to transcribe a Sinhalese or Burmese ms is not a sufficient qualification to produce a reliable Pāli text. I suspect, also, that those who did know Sanskrit emended silently, especially in matters of sandhi. The Dīgha-nikāya and its commentary seem to me to have been tidied in this way. Even those editors, like Fausbøll, whom one had always been taught to respect, produced texts

¹I will give no examples in this article, but a glance at a few pages of the first volume of *DOP* will show what I mean.

with many doubtful readings.²

I would count as wrong any reading in E^c which differs from a unanimous reading in the other three editions, when (a) one can explain the difference by a misreading of Burmese or, especially, Sinhalese characters; (b) the E^c reading is metrically incorrect (not just irregular, but impossible); (c) we are faced with an inexplicable form, against something which makes sense. In the case of (c), of course, the argument against dismissing E^c as a wrong reading is a recourse to the principle of *lectio difficilior melior*, and a suggestion that B^c in particular normalises readings and erases difficulties. I am not convinced that the rule of *lectio difficilior* is valid for Pāli texts, given the uncertain and contaminated traditions of mss and editions. And to try to defend a word, for which one can find no real etymological justification or explanation, and reject an alternative, well attested and commented on, which has an appropriate meaning, seems somewhat perverse. In any case, B^c itself exhibits some idiosyncratic readings, which a normalising or rationalising tendency might have been expected to change.³

On other occasions, where E^c differs from the other editions, I would hesitate to say the reading was wrong. I accept that it may represent another, valid, tradition, but I believe readers ought to be made aware of the alternative. Often too there are varying agreements and disagreements among the editions — E^c with C^c against B^c and S^c; B^c and C^c against E^c and S^c; indeed all combinations are found. Nor should one think that any of the editions or traditions is free from error. As an extreme case, it is often hard to make sense of any of the editions of the Peṭakopadesa.

²I have read the statement that Fausbøll's "great edition of the Jātakas ... is still unsurpassed". Perhaps the writer meant "not yet superseded". Otherwise it is a meaningless assertion. Studies of individual Jātakas have clearly improved on Fausbøll's text, and anyone who looked closely and carefully at his text would find much to question.

³See e.g. the consistent reading in B^c of *dhamakaraṇa*, against the explicable *dhammakaraka* found usually in the other editions.

If one looks at the readings of the other editions, one finds in all traditions inconsistencies, incomprehensibility, more problems. Often, however, even small differences from E^c give readings which are more convincing, because more subtle, more elegant, more Pāli. But the Pāli of the PTS editions is the only Pāli seemingly used and depended upon by Geiger in his *Grammar* (Geiger 1916), by Rhys Davids and Stede in the *Dictionary*, by A.K. Warder in his *Introduction to Pali* (Warder 1963), and by most writers on Pāli and Theravāda Buddhism even today. It is as if those who studied and researched and published in the past had produced works that somehow have also become canonical. Yet every one of them was fallible, and was working with fallible materials.

I have become convinced that we should take nothing on trust. We should use all existing dictionaries and grammatical works with caution and scepticism, checking statements and references wherever and whenever possible. As Sir Monier Monier-Williams wrote in the Preface to his *Sanskrit–English Dictionary*:

Nay, I am constrained to confess that as I advanced further on the path of knowledge, my trustfulness in others ... experienced a series of disagreeable and unexpected shocks; till now ... I find myself left with my faith in the accuracy of human beings generally — *and certainly not excepting myself* — somewhat distressingly disturbed.
[My emphasis.]

When we open Geiger's *Grammar*, we are presented with what appears to be an exhaustive account of Pāli grammatical forms. Statements are made, rules devised, paradigms laid out. But what about the evidence? There are forms there I cannot find in the texts; there are rules which depend on one occurrence of a form, not supported in all editions; there is, inevitably, much missing, which could give a different picture of the language.⁴

⁴The evidence for forms is often weak, e.g. Geiger §39:1: “k appears for g in: *akalu* Mil 338,13”. But only in C^c and E^c. B^c has *agalu-*, S^c *aggalu-*. And cf. Ja

Another inheritance, the Pali Text Society's *Pali-English Dictionary (PED)*, remains useful, but the meanings it gives must be checked against Sanskrit or Prakrit, and its references verified. Especially with rare words or words with no obvious derivation or Sanskrit equivalent, we should look at alternative forms in other editions. When I told a Ph.D. student not to trust everything in *PED*, her supervisor reproached me, but it is the first thing we should teach any student of Pāli. We should even on occasion question the *Critical Pāli Dictionary (CPD)*. Its first editors, Dines Andersen and Helmer Smith, were indeed giants of Pāli scholarship, but their work too should not be treated as canonical. They were not infallible, and for very good reason they could not always be right (nor have all of their successors at *CPD* had their wide knowledge and intelligent interpretative powers). And

IV 440.23* (E^c *akaluṃ*; B^c, C^c *agaḷuṃ*; S^c *aggaluṃ*); VI 144.23* (E^c *akalu-*; B^c, C^c *agaḷu-*; S^c *aggalu-*); elsewhere E^c has *agaru* or *agalu*. — “*lakanaka*, ‘anchor’ Mil 377.19.23”. Again, only in C^c and E^c (*nāvāḷakanakaṃ ... nāvaṃ laketi*). B^c and S^c have *nāvāḷagganakaṃ ... nāvaṃ laggeti*. — §39:3: “c appears for j in: *pāceti* ‘drives’ Dh 135 ... beside *pājeti* Ja II 122.5”. At Dh 135 B^c and S^c read *pājeti*. I am aware of course of the revision of Geiger by K.R. Norman (PTS 1994), and of the Pāli grammar of T. Oberlies (de Gruyter 2001). But both of these are vulnerable to the same criticism: a reliance on E^c. See e.g. Geiger 1994 §38:1a (not in Geiger 1916): “kh is voiced to gh in *nighaññasi*, ‘you will dig’, Ja VI 13.18*”; Oberlies 2001 §51: “*nighaññati* ‘strikes down’ ([denominative from] **nighañña*)”. The form is puzzling, and Oberlies may be correct, but it might be of interest to note the various readings: C^c, E^c *yaṃ kāsuyā nighaññasi*; B^c, S^c *nihanñasi*; Ja VI 13.27: C^c *nighaññasi ti nihanissasi, yaṃ tvaṃ ettha nihanissamī ti saññāya kāsuyā nikhāṇati so ahan ti dīpeti*; B^c, S^c *nihanñasi ti nihanissasi ...*; E^c *nighaññasi ti nikhāṇissasi, yaṃ maṃ ettha ...*). The verse is quoted at Cp-a 225.15*, where all the editions read *nikhāññasi*. We might also compare Ja IV 102.9* where B^c, E^c read: *sace adhammo hañchati dhammam ajja*, while C^c, S^c read *haññati*, in all cases glossed (102.25^c) with *hanissati*. See also *āhañchaṃ, āhañchi(ṃ)*, with vll. of *āhaññiṃ*. Oberlies, §14:4, gives *pāceti*, without reference (see above), and without making clear that the more usual form in all editions is *pājeti*. *Re ajakara*, also in §14:4, note that this form appears only in E^c at Ja III 484.16*; in the other editions, and in E^c elsewhere, the form is *ajagara*.

one of the weaknesses of Franklin Edgerton's *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, useful and enjoyably personal though it is, is its trust in *PED*.

Speaking here as a scholar of Pāli, not of Buddhism, I think we are sometimes limited and confined by our inheritance. We must bring to our study of the texts our knowledge of language, of India, and of religion, from outside those texts. The interpretation of Pāli has looked backwards (and inwards) for as long as we know. Buddhaghosa followed the Sinhalese commentaries, which themselves presumably were based on commentaries brought from India. Aggavaṃsa in his account of the Pāli language, the *Saddanāṭi*, not only describes Pāli as he found it in the *Buddhavacana* — absolutely legitimately — but explains and interprets it in a way limited by traditional beliefs about the language and its status. Warder, in his *Introduction to Pali*, accepts the same kind of restraints, and indeed often follows Aggavaṃsa's interpretations. He teaches the language in a manner that is irritating and bizarre to anyone who knows any Sanskrit. Some of the statements of Aggavaṃsa and Warder are true only in a very tenuous sense. One feels all three of these scholars are deliberately ignoring or denying certain things that they know in order to keep within the restraints of tradition and the past.

The first Pāli dictionary, the *Abhidhānappadīpikā*, while including some specifically Buddhist terms and connotations, largely looked to Sanskrit and the *Amarakośa*, and is not a true reflection of the Pāli of the texts, but it is probably the last work of Pāli scholarship in which we can complain of too heavy a reliance on Sanskrit. The *Dictionary of the Pāli Language* by R.C. Childers includes the material of the *Abhidhānappadīpikā*, but depends much more on the interpretations of the Pāli commentaries and of the Saṅgha. After Childers, in the work of the early translators of Pāli texts, we often find mere intuition and guesswork, buttressed by a strong conviction of what a Buddhist context required.

These translations are an influential inheritance, but in them, not infrequently, the sense of the Sanskrit equivalent to a word was ignored or rejected — I do not know whether this was due to a conscious decision or to ignorance. Then the sense of English words was stretched and indeed violated, or words were coined, invented. A prime exponent of this method was Mrs Rhys Davids.⁵ Fortunately not many of her coinages have survived, but other translators also preferred a rare word to a common one, such as “fruition” for “fruit”; or coined words, perhaps by finding for each part of the Pāli word the equivalent in Latin.⁶ Many other neologisms or strained usages of existing words, for example in the translations of Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, seem to have acquired that canonical status. There was apparently a desire to create what one might call technical terms of Theravāda Buddhism. This is convenient for translators and interpreters, of course, and means that they do not have to consider what the texts are really saying in each context. But I think such a practice obscures the meaning, and is anyway false, since I cannot believe that the Buddha spoke, as for example sociologists do, in a jargon no ordinary person would understand without a glossary.

Another inheritance is the “literal” translation. A literal translation is not a translation, because the meaning of a Pāli word or passage has not been expressed in English. For particular words, one English equivalent is chosen as the basic meaning, and that English word is used

⁵Her oddness can perhaps be fully appreciated only by a native English speaker, with such usages as “Norm” as a translation of *dhamma*, “the Well-farer” for *sugata*, “clansman” for *kulaputta*. Her translations, especially of verse, have a medieval air (e.g. “eke the dappled deer”) not really appropriate to the context, or aim at poetry and attain only obscurity (“In grasping not O well is him”) rendering *anupādāya nibbuto*; note that in this Saṃyutta verse E^c reads *nibbūto*.

⁶For example, for *vaṭṭati* with the preverb *ā-* an etymological equivalent would be Latin *advertere*. And so we find used a verb “to advert”, Unfortunately, “to advert” already exists in the English language, and the standard dictionaries do not support a current meaning which is really equivalent to *āvattati*. What was wrong with “turn to”?

in all contexts.⁷ Throughout a whole text, Miss Horner's translations furnish good examples of literalness (not always even accurate) which produces at times incomprehensibility (e.g. "state of further-men" to translate *uttarimanussadhamma*). Did such translators ever ask, "What would an Indian hearer have understood from this passage? What indeed is the Buddha's concern here, what problem is he addressing, what is he saying?" This type of pseudo-translation is also to be found in *PED*, whose compilers seem sometimes perverse in their refusal to take Sanskrit as evidence for the meaning of a word. It may seem that my criticism is rather of style than of interpretation, but the influence of *PED* and of past translators has been strong: one sees the same translations and expressions, which often have very little justification, appearing again and again in new translations and works on Buddhism, perpetuating that strange and barbaric language, aptly called Buddhist Hybrid English.⁸

It is no insult, it is not *lèse-majesté* to criticise the texts of Fausbøll or Feer, to question the paradigms of Geiger, to disagree with the translations of T.W. Rhys Davids and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli as well as with those of Mrs Rhys Davids and Miss Horner. On the contrary, it is absolutely necessary if there is to be any progress in Pāli.

If we are prepared to look to the next 125 years, I believe we should be prepared also to re-do everything. First, we must re-edit the texts of the Canon and the commentaries. Even before that, however, we need to discuss and decide how this should be done. I myself would advocate a middle way, between one extreme of considering and accepting isolated readings, and the other of simply taking over e.g. the Burmese version. But the task is not simple or straightforward. The question of whether to try to consult as many mss as possible, and how to decide on their

⁷ Like Mr Norman (Norman 1997, pp. 17–18) I particularly dislike "skilful" as a translation for *kusala* in contexts where it does not make sense. Who decided "skilful" was the basic, literal meaning of Sanskrit *kusala*, rather than "good", or "healthy" or "wholesome"?

⁸See Griffiths 1981.

usefulness, is a difficult one. There are many occasions when alternative spellings and perhaps also alternative expressions are equally valid, and when the editions show no consistency. I give twenty-one citations in my dictionary article on the numeral 40; all editions have *cattārīsa-* sometimes, all have *cattāḷīsa-* sometimes, and all but C^c have *cattālīsa-* sometimes. I expect a similar pattern when I reach the numeral 50. There is alternation between *-aka* and *-ika*, e.g. *-bhūmaka* and *-bhūmika*, and of course there are the alternatives of *-ika*, *-iya*, *-ita*. For a good example of variation in readings, see the passages quoted in *DOP I* s.v. *āveṭhikā*.⁹ An editor will have to use his or her judgment and provide an informative critical apparatus.¹⁰ We should make use of the considerable amount of good scholarship, especially of the last forty years or so, on the transmission of the texts and on individual words (as long as they are not ghostwords); and of the study of the Sanskrit and Chinese and Tibetan versions.¹¹ There should also be agreement on spelling and punctuation conventions, so that there can be consistency and clarity. Let us then at least produce a meaningful text, for which we have good evidence in more than one tradition.

⁹These and other variations can often be explained by reference to other Prakrits or to scribal conventions, and can tell us something of the evolution of the text as we have it. The search for an “original” text (a genuine Buddhavacana?) is interesting, but always speculative, and is probably not the concern of an editor.

¹⁰It is on occasions hard to know what form of a word an editor should choose. Often the present editions are not consistent, e.g. between *jaṅgama* and *jaṅgala*, or between *japa* and *jappa*. Consider also the possibilities *uppilāvīta*, *ubbilāvīta*, *ubbillāvīta*, *ubbillāpīta* (see *DOP I* s.v. *uppilavati*). Note also that Geiger (§38:6) cites only *ubbillāvīta* and *ubbillāpīta*. Or what should the choice be for the name of Mahāvīra, always *nāṭaputta* in B^c and S^c, sometimes *nāṭaputta*, sometimes *nāṭhaputta* in C^c and E^c?

¹¹Compare the painstaking and meticulous work on tiny fragments, e.g. from the Stein and Hoernle collections, with the way some writers on Pāli do not even consult the Burmese and Sinhalese editions before pronouncing on a word.

On the basis of these new editions, we must then produce a new, accurate, thorough grammar;¹² then, I am afraid, someone will have to re-write my dictionary. And finally we can produce good, readable, trustworthy translations.

I know, of course, that I am speaking of Utopia. The first, and perhaps insurmountable, difficulty is to find people capable of editing the texts, and willing to do so. Such people must have a solid knowledge of Sanskrit and at least some Prakrit, and a firm grasp of Pāli metrics, as well as a thorough understanding of how Pāli works, and of the whole spread of Pāli literature. And how can they, without reliable grammars and dictionaries?

But it may be that what I suggest is not necessary (or even desirable). As Mr Norman said (Norman 1990, p. 33), “It may justifiably be asked whether the errors which may remain in the editions of Pāli texts really matter, and whether they are likely to have resulted in any misunderstanding of the basic and most important elements of Buddhism.” The state of the texts, and of Pāli scholarship generally, probably does not matter to those, perhaps the majority of the readers of the publications of the PTS, who are interested in Theravāda Buddhism, not in Pāli.¹³ Nothing any of us does, I suspect, will change the understanding of the principal tenets of the religion, or give startling new insights into the thoughts of the Buddha. We can go on, slightly

¹²I hope that *DOP* will be a foundation and provide material for this new grammar. In my articles on verbs I aim to give examples of all tenses and infinite forms; on nouns and adjectives, examples of significant cases and irregularities. I am also compiling lists of certain formations, e.g. feminines in *-nī*, such as *ārāṃikīnī*, *isīnī*.

¹³ cf. Zürcher 1959, p. 356, n. 152: “The ideal of a cursory way of reading the classics without detailed philological studies was much in vogue [in China] in the fourth century; it agreed with the prevailing *hsüan-hsüeh* opinion that the written text is only an imperfect and expedient expression of the hidden wisdom of the Sage, and that the student must try to grasp the general principles underlying the words rather than indulge in a careful and painstaking study of the letter of the text”— a practice taken over by some Chinese converts to Buddhism.

improving the publications in a piecemeal manner,¹⁴ writing articles (in learned journals) about individual words, continuing in a confining circle of compromised accuracy, approximate truth.

Well, it does matter to me. For the few of us whose job is the Pāli language, I believe there is a responsibility to provide information and material as accurate, as true, as we can possibly make them. To provide them not only for those who are drawn to Theravāda Buddhism, but for other scholars — those who study the texts of Buddhism in other languages, who study other forms of Buddhism and other religions, who study languages. Otherwise, what do we think we are doing?

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¹⁴As with the rather arbitrary corrections made when volumes are reprinted. This is a problem for me and the dictionary, as I cannot check readings in every reprint.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CPD* V. Trenckner, D. Andersen and H. Smith (et al.), *A Critical Pāli Dictionary*, Copenhagen, 1924–
- DOP I* M. Cone, *A Dictionary of Pāli, Part I*. Oxford: PTS, 2001.
- JPTS* *Journal of the Pali Text Society*
- PED* T.W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, London: PTS, 1921–25

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