

Chinese for Pāli Students : Introduction

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A vast body of Buddhist literature exists in Chinese, both in the form of translations from various Indic languages and native compositions. The Chinese began translating Buddhist texts in the Han period and continued to do so until the C12th CE, a period of over 1000 years. Often clumsy and inaccurate, the early translations bear testament to the conceptual and linguistic difficulties that faced the Chinese when they first encountered Buddhism. Fortunately, gifted Indian, Central Asian and Chinese monks persevered over many decades and the overall standard of translation skills improved to the extent that it usually became possible to render the contents of any Buddhist text into Chinese, though a tendency to render the meaning rather than the literal sense can often be observed.

One extremely important aspect of the Chinese corpus of translations from Indian texts is the preservation in translation of works that have otherwise been lost to the ravages of time. For those interested in early Buddhism and its development, Chinese resources are thus very valuable. Those working with Pali materials may be interested in the thousands of pages of translations of Āgama materials, Vinayas from different schools, Jātakas and Avādanas. Moreover, many of these texts of early Buddhism preserved in Chinese have close parallels to Pali versions, a feature that will assist one in the study of Buddhist texts through the medium of Chinese.

One of the difficulties facing a prospective student of Buddhist Chinese texts is the absence of any work in any Western language dealing specifically with the form of the language found in these texts (hereafter BTC, "Buddhist Textual Chinese"). There are a number of excellent introductions to Classical Chinese and though they may give some general help concerning pre-modern Chinese, they primarily deal with the erudite language of Confucius, Mencius and the other great sages. By the time Buddhist texts began to be translated in any significant quantity, the Chinese language itself had undergone a number of changes. Moreover, the target readership of Buddhist texts was intended to be far wider than just the gentleman-scholars who preserved the language of the Confucian classics. For example, Buddhist texts in Chinese often make use of grammatical constructions, idioms and vocabulary from the spoken language, so that the Buddhist message might be understood by many more people than would otherwise have been the case. This presents a significant problem for people today approaching Buddhist texts solely with a training in Classical Chinese - akin to the difficulties one might have reading the medieval Italian of Dante with only a knowledge of Latin. Similarly, a knowledge of modern Chinese, as a language, is even more unhelpful - the language has evolved even further over the thousand year period that has elapsed since the last Buddhist text was translated in the early Song dynasty.

Nevertheless, in my view, it is feasible to master enough BTC to read a good range of texts, especially sutra material, with a bit of help to point the learner in the right direction. If there is sufficient interest, I'll try to post some learning materials

intermittently as other tasks permit. There are, of course, some aspects of BTC that cannot be covered: the pronunciation and the method of writing with characters. Any suitable beginners handbook for modern Chinese should cover these matters adequately.

For somebody coming from a study of Pali or Sanskrit, BTC will be a big surprise: no declensions, no conjugations, no tenses, no singulars or plurals. In some respects, one might say that BTC most closely resembles a simplified version of English in several respects. The main challenge for a beginner is not the grammar of BTC which is fairly simple, but the writing system, though the total number of individual characters used in Buddhist sutras is relatively small - perhaps as few as 750 characters cover 90% of the total used in sutras. One good way of learning and remembering new characters, after having mastered the principles of writing them, is to copy out the text repeatedly by hand. This practice has a long history in East Asian countries and is additionally supposed to be an excellent source of merit.

Now, a brief overview of the BTC language might be helpful to orientate you before you plunge into the text itself. Because of the nature of BTC, it is not really possible to set out a detailed series of graded grammar lessons, as one might find with an introduction to Pali or Sanskrit, beyond a few general hints.

Like all forms of Chinese, BTC is written with characters, sometimes also called logograms. Unlike an alphabetic script, a Chinese character represents a word but does not indicate its pronunciation - that has to be learnt separately, although the way in which a character is structured can give hints about the pronunciation, but you would first have to know a fair number of characters to make any reasonable guesses. Also, Chinese characters are written continuously with no spaces between them - even punctuation is a relatively modern innovation. The punctuation marks used in the BTC text below are not full stops but merely mark pauses, some of which may coincidentally mark the end of sentences. Many Chinese words are monosyllabic, written with just one character. This is especially true of Classical Chinese. However, as Chinese developed in the medieval period, more and more words came to be written with two characters - the meaning in such cases often being greater than that of the two individual characters. Part of the challenge of reading BTC is developing the ability to know the word boundaries. This probably only comes with experience.

Traditionally, Chinese words are divided into two categories: content words and function words. The vast majority of Chinese words are content words, comprising verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and so forth. Function words comprise a far smaller group of words that are used to show the grammatical relationships between and modifications of the content words. In BTC, these number no more than one hundred, of which less than thirty are of high frequency. In many cases, function words can be completely omitted if unnecessary in BTC and earlier Classical Chinese - the context and the syntactically relationship of the content words are often sufficient to decode the meaning. Even in comparison with BTC, modern Chinese is positively verbose !

Even with the helpful presence of function words, the chief key to understanding BTC is the structure of the sentence and the ability to identify the role of each word therein. That is to say, it is the word order that is the key to understanding BTC, just as with English.

Two basic sentence types can be identified here.

Equational

These take the form A [is] B, though there is rarely anything corresponding to “is” in the sentence. In the text below, 色無常 shi wuchang is equational, and literally translates as “rūpa not-permanent”.

Declarative

A verb lies at the heart of such sentences. Sub-divisions include:

Transitive S + V + O or S + V + O + O

Intransitive S + V

To each of these, a complement can be added. In Classical Chinese, the complement almost always follows the verb and its object, but often it precedes the subject and verb in BTC.

Note that when a transitive verb is transposed with its object, the verb is passive. There are several examples of this in the text below, such as 喜貪盡 *xitan jin* “delight and attachment is exhausted / eliminated”.

To display the following correctly, you will need two Unicode fonts:

Gentium for the roman diacritics

MingliU or similar for the Chinese text

Both can be downloaded for free from a number of internet sources - let me know if you have difficulty finding them and I'll try and sort something out.

There is no adequate printed Chinese-English dictionary for use with Buddhist materials but Chuck Muller's online dictionary at <http://www.acmuller.net> is an excellent resource for Literary and Buddhist Chinese texts.

NB: In the following lessons, tones have not been indicated since they are probably not so important for a beginner wanting to read Buddhist texts. Additionally, it is virtually impossible to learn the correct enunciation of the tones by description alone, without the help of a Chinese teacher.

Samyukta-āgama I.1 (cf SN: 22.12)

如是我聞。一時。佛住舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園。爾時。世尊告諸比丘。當觀色無常。如是觀者。則為正觀。正觀者。則生厭離。厭離者。喜貪盡。喜貪盡者。說心解脫。如是觀受。想。行。識無常。如是觀者。則為正觀。正觀者。則生厭離。厭離者。喜貪盡。喜貪盡者。說心解脫。如是。比丘。心解脫者。若欲自證。則能自證。我生已盡。梵行已立。所作已作。自知不受後有。如觀無常。苦。空。非我。亦復如是時。諸比丘聞佛所說。歡喜奉行

如是我聞。

如: *ru*, (vb) be such as, be like ... Though strictly speaking 如 is a verb, it will often be convenient to translate it as “like” or “thus”.

是: *shi* (pn) this. This is one of the few demonstrative pronouns found in BTC. Note that no idea of gender or plurality is conveyed. The others will be noted as they are encountered.

如是: *ru shi* = thus, in this manner. This was adopted as the conventional translation of *evam*.

我: *wo* (n) I, me, my. The precise translation depends upon the syntactical context of 我 *wo*.

聞: *wen* (v) hear. No tense is indicated, but any reader would know by convention that this event took place in the past.

一時。佛住舍衛國祇樹給孤獨園。

一時: *yishi* (adv) one time, on one occasion. This indicates that the following occurred in the past.

佛: *fo* (n) Buddha. The ancient pronunciation of *fo* was closer to the first syllable of “Buddha” and thus this is a phonetic transcription rather than a translation.

住: *zhu* (v) dwell [at], stay [at], live [at]. Again no tense is indicated, but we know it is past because of the opening 一時. Chinese does not need a locative particle to link the place with the verb of dwelling.

舍衛國: *Shewei-guo* (pn) Śrāvastī. The first part (*shewei*) is the modern pronunciation of an ancient phonetic transliteration of Śrāvastī, while the *guo* means “country, state”.

祇樹: *Qishu* (n) Jetavana. This is part transliteration and part translation. The qi would once have sounded like “jet”, while the shu translates “tree[s]” (= grove).

給孤獨: *Jigudu* (n) Anāthapiṇḍada. This is a translation of his name, “he who gives to the solitary / unprotected”.

園: *yuan* (n) park (*ārama*).

爾時。世尊告諸比丘。

爾: *er* (prn) this, that. Another demonstrative pronoun, but it is generally used in conjunction with a following word (“this x, that x”) and not used alone, in contrast to 是 *shi* above.

爾時: *ershi* (adv) this / that time. For a natural English rendering, we would need to expand this to “at that time, on that occasion” etc.

世尊: *shizun* (n) Bhagavat. This is the conventional way bhagavat is translated but it literally means “world-honoured one”.

告: *gao* (v) teach, instruct, inform. The verb 告 *gao* is used when socially superior individuals speak to their inferiors.

諸: *zhu* (n) pluralizing prefix. There is no way a word in itself can be made plural, but BTC uses a few prefixes (and suffixes) to indicate a plurality of group of something. Strictly speaking, 諸 *zhu* means “the class of ..., all the various ...”, but it came to be used conventionally to translate plural nouns from Indic texts, although it is only used when deemed necessary.

比丘: *biqiu* (n) bhikṣu. A transliteration of the Indian word.

當觀色無常。

當: *dang* (aux) should, ought to. Originally a full verb, the word 當 *dang* also acquired a specialized use as an auxiliary verb to indicate either “should, must, ought” or sometimes a simple future “will, shall”.

觀: *guan* (v) see, behold, perceive. Combined with the preceding word, 當觀 *dang guan* means “should perceive, should see” etc.

色: *shi* (n) colour-form. Used to translate *rūpa*.

無: *wu* (vb) not exist, lack, be without. BTC uses several different words as negatives, some with verbs and others with nouns. Three of the most important occur in this short text, the first being 無 *wu* here which negates nouns. If used with a verb, the verb then functions as a noun.

常: *chang* (n) permanence. In other contexts, 常 *chang* can also be an adjective.

無常: *wuchang* (n) lack permanence, impermanent (*anicca*).

Note the construction of this sentence: verb + noun [is] noun, with the absence of any copula (“is” etc) showing that 色 *shi* and 無常 *wuchang* are to be equated. This is quite usual as Chinese originally did not have a copula verb as such. However, a specialized use of the pronoun 是 *shi* evolved, in the sense of “is” and this is encountered as such with increasing frequency through the era of textual translation in China.

如是觀者。則為正觀。

者: *zhe* (n) nominalizing suffix. This is one of the most important function words in BTC. An unlimited range of nouns and noun phrases can be generated from verbs or verbal phrases when this suffix is attached to them. The effect is to convert the verb into a noun meaning, referring to the action itself of the verb, the fact of that action, or the person performing the action.

觀者: *guan zhe* (n) one who sees. The verb has been nominalized by the addition of 者 *zhe*. Here, the most probable sense is “one who sees”, but it could also mean “the seeing, the act of seeing”. A secondary but important use of *zhe* is to highlight the topic of a sentence. Hence, this compound could also be translated by “as for one who sees thus / as for the seeing thus”.

則: *ze* (conj) [if] ... then ... , consequently, accordingly, namely. This conjunction is used to introduce with emphasis a comment clause concerning the subject or topic of the sentence.

為: *wei* (v) do, act; be; deemed to [be]. This very common word will also be encountered with other meanings, which will be noted as they occur.

正: *zheng* (adj) correct, true, proper. Adjectives in BTC are quasi-verbal.

正觀: *zhengguan* (v) see correctly. Adjectives are, as in English, usually placed before the noun they modify. In compound words, 正 *zheng* often translates the Pali and Sanskrit prefix “*saṃ*”, but it is also commonly used for “*saṃyak*”.

正觀者。則生厭離。

正觀者: *zhengguan* (n) one who sees correctly

生: *sheng* (v) give rise to, generate. This verb will also be encountered with an intransitive meaning, “occur”, “be born” and so on.

厭離: *yanli* (n) disgust, disillusion (*nibbinda* etc).

厭離者。喜貪盡。

厭離者: *yanlizhe* (n) one who is disgusted, disillusioned

喜: *xi* (n) delight (*nandi*).

貪: *tan* (n) attachment (*raga*).

盡: *jin* (v) exhaust, eliminate. The placing of this verb, following *xitan*, the topic of this clause, shows that it is passive.

喜貪盡者。說心解脫。

喜貪盡者: *xitan jin zhe* (n) one for whom delight and attachment are eliminated. This is an example of the nominalization of a verbal phrase

說: *shuo* (v) say. This could be translated as “I [the Buddha] say that ... “ or “one says that ...”

心: *xin* (n) mind, heart. The same word is used in Chinese for citta and hadaya.

解脫: *jietuo* (v) liberation (vimutti, vimutta etc). Here jietuo is most likely to be a passive verb (“is liberated”) as it follows xin, the topic of this clause.

如是觀受。想。行。識無常。

如是: *ru shi* (adv) Here rushi could also be translated as “likewise, similiary”

受: *shou* (n) feeling (vedanā)

想: *xiang* (n) ideation (saññā)

行: *xing* (n) motivations (saṅkhāra)

識: *shi* (n) consciousness (viññāṇa)

如是觀者。則為正觀。正觀者。則生厭離。厭離者。喜貪盡。喜貪盡者。說心解脫。

This passage repeats what the Buddha said about how rūpa should be viewed, now with respect to the other four khandhas.

如是。比丘。心解脫者。若欲自證。則能自證。

如是: *rushi* (adv) thus, in this manner

比丘: *biqu* (n) bhikṣu. The original Indic text would have used the vocative here. Note that the pluralizing particle 諸 *zhu* is not used as it would have been deemed unnecessary.

心解脫者: *xin jietuo zhe* (n) one whose mind is liberated. A nominalized verbal phrase.

若: *ruo* (v) if. Though ruo, like its cognate 如 *ru*, is strictly speaking a verb, it is easier to treat it merely as an “if”.

欲: *yu* (v) want to, desire. Here yu is used as a kind of auxiliary verb as with the English “want to [do s.th]” etc. As such it should be placed immediately before the main verb, which is here a compound reflexive verb *zizheng*.

自: *zi* (prn) self, oneself. This is the main reflexive pronoun used in BTC and can be used for all persons.

證: *zheng* (vb) investigate, examine; verify, witness

自證: *zi zheng* (v) verify for oneself

能: *neng* (aux) be able. This is another very common auxiliary verb, here meaning “be able to, can [do xxx]”. In some translations styles, especially during the Tang period, *neng* is just used as a marker of the active form a verbs, with the “able to” sense minimized.

我生已盡。梵行已立。所作已作。自知不受後有。

我: *wo* (pn) Here *wo* is best translated as “my” although, as usual, nothing indicates a possessive form of the pronoun except for the context.

生: *sheng* (n) birth, life (*jāti*)

已: *yi* (aux) Another important auxiliary verb, indicating completed action and conventionally giving a past or perfect tense translation with the main verb, as with the following.

已盡: *yijin* (v) exhausted, eliminated (*khīṇā*).

梵行: *fanxing* (n) brahmacaryā. This compound is formed from 梵 *fan*, a transcription of *brahma*, and 行 *xing*, here meaning conduct, behaviour. *Xing* is also a very common verb which has the basic meaning of “go”.

立: *li* (v) establish. Here, with the 已 *yi* prefix, it means “established” (*vusitaṃ*). An additional, very common, meaning of 立 *li* is “stand”.

所: *suo* (n) nominalizing prefix. Like 者 *zhe*, *suo* nominalizes verbs by its use, but the verb is nominalized with reference to its object as “that which / what is [done to be done]”. This prefix is of great importance in BTC and will be encountered with great frequency.

作: *zuo* (v) do, make.

所作: *suo-zuo* (vn) what is to be done (*katam*)

已作: *yizuo* (v) has been done (*karaṇīyaṃ*)

知: *zhi* (v) know (*pajānāti*)

不: *bu* (adv) not. The second of the main words of negation used in BTC, but only negates verbs and verbalized nouns.

受: *shou* (v) undergo, experience (*itthattāya*)

後有: *houyou* (n) hereafter (*aparaṃ*).

Note that this section in the Pali version is given as reported speech, indicated by the closing *iti*. This is one area where BTC can be confusing since there is often no indication that something is given as speech. Though there are some opening formulas for speech, often this can only be understood from the context, especially when the reported speech is a quote of somebody else's thoughts or words.

如觀無常。苦。空。非我。亦復如是。

苦: *ku* (n) suffering (dukkha)

空: *kong* (n) empty (suññatā)

非: *fei* (v) [is] not. This is the third of the main word of negation used in BTC. This too is a quasi-verb and is thus used to negate nouns or nominalized verbs. The difference between 無 *wu* and 非 *fei* is that that the former negates existence [= there is not ...], while the latter negates identity [= is not ...].

非我: *feiwo* (n) not self (anatta). Some Chinese translators use 非我 *feiwo* for anatta, as here, but one will also frequently encounter 無我 *wuwo*.

亦復: *yifu* (adv) moreover, furthermore.

如是: *ru shi* here is clearly verbal - “are like this”.

時。諸比丘聞佛所說。歡喜奉行

時: *shi* (adv) then.

所說: *suoshuo* (vn) what is / was said. Here 佛所說 *fo suoshuo* means “what the Buddha said”.

歡喜: *guanxi* (v) delight'

奉行: *fengxing* (v) do respectfully.

歡喜奉行: *guanxi fengshing* (v) As a compound verb, this is used to translate *abhinandati* or similar.

Here for comparison is a parallel Pali version of this sūtra. The content is essentially the same but there are some small differences in the wording. Nevertheless, it will be seen that the BTC version perfectly reflects the content of the Pali version.

22.12. Evaṃ me sutam: sāvatthiyam. tatra kho ...pe... “rūpaṃ, bhikkhave, aniccaṃ, vedanā aniccā, saññā aniccā, saṅkhārā aniccā, viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ. evaṃ passaṃ, bhikkhave, sutavā ariyasāvako rūpasmiṃpi nibbindati, vedanāyapi nibbindati, saññāyapi nibbindati, saṅkhāresupi nibbindati, viññāṇasmimpi nibbindati. nibbindaṃ virajjati; virāgā vimuccati. vimuttasmiṃ vimuttam itī ñāṇaṃ hoti. ‘khīṇā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ, nāparaṃ itthattāyā’ti pajānātī’ti.