

On translating from Pāli

K. R. NORMAN

1. General considerations in translation

Translation from one language into another depends upon three factors: a would-be translator must first have a text which he wishes to translate; he must understand the meaning of that text; he must then transmit that understanding to readers in another language.

The need to have a text to translate is self-evident. By understanding that text we mean that the translator must not only know what the words mean, but he must also, to quote a recent writer on the subject, "place the text under discussion in its historical context, both in the broad sense of tracing continuities and discontinuities with the earlier tradition, and in the narrower sense by seeing how a given text fits into the larger corpus of its author."¹ By transmitting we mean that the translator must give that meaning in a readable way, i.e. in a style of language which is acceptable to non-specialists, and at the same time reflects all the nuances of the original, so that the readers of the translation experience the same reactions as the original hearers or readers.

To understand, one must be proficient in the language of the original text. It is not always understood by readers of many translations from Oriental languages that the translators thereof often had no formal training in those languages. Self-taught, or taught by native scholars whose standard of proficiency in teaching was not necessarily high, they were forced, in the days before such aids as good dictionaries and grammars in a European language existed, to translate by the "intuitive" method, whereby they examined the context and deduced from that what the meaning must be. As Professor O'Flaherty has stated: "Many of our most valuable insights into otherwise obscure terms [in the R̥gveda] have come from scholars who have seen what the meaning must be from [the] context, from an understanding of Vedic thought processes."² The wonder is not that these

intuitive translators were sometimes incorrect, but that they were correct so often.

It is clear that if the aim of transmission is to convey everything that the original conveyed to its readers, then it is most unlikely, even impossible, that this should be done perfectly. As Professor Brough has said: "We seek, in fact, the best possible solution which our limitations will allow."³ It is obvious that it is difficult for one generation to understand perfectly a text of an earlier generation, for the social and historical backgrounds of the two generations are different, if only to a small extent. It seems likely that each generation would understand a text in the light of their own social and historical background, unless (and perhaps even if) they make an effort to rediscover the background of the original hearers. When an attempt is made to understand a text belonging to a generation which is both earlier and alien, then there is the added difficulty that the gap between the cultural backgrounds may be very great.

Attempts made by translators to bridge such gaps in historical and cultural backgrounds sometimes lead to bizarre results. A good example of the danger of taking words out of their cultural background, and explaining them by means of an equivalent in the translator's background, can be seen in M.R. Kale's translation of Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaṣīya*, where the Sanskrit word *vimāna* is translated as "balloon".⁴ *Vimāna* is perhaps not easy to translate, but "flying palace" would not be too wide off the mark.⁵ Kale, however, conscious of the fact that "flying palace" would mean little to his contemporary readers in their cultural and historical background, decided to make his translation "up-to-date" in the sense that he not only translated the word, but also translated its cultural background too. Unfortunately, such a practice necessitates a continual "updating", as it is always essential to produce an interpretation which accords with the reader's background.

Just as to understand one must be proficient in the language from which one is translating,

so, too, to communicate one must be proficient in the language into which one is translating. If one wishes to translate into English, one must write English at a standard which is acceptable to native English speakers. This does not necessitate being English, because there are those who are bi-lingual, and speak and write like a native Englishman, although not English. Nevertheless, such persons are comparatively rare, and one must face the fact that very few non-English people are likely to be able to write fault-free idiomatic English. Dr Schokker has, in fact, stated: "The difficulties for a non-English speaking individual in rendering Sanskrit poetry into English are insuperable."⁶

There are ways around this difficulty. Joint works can be produced, in which one person makes a preliminary translation, and an English "stylist" produces the final version. This was done with the translation of the Kathāvatthu made by Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs Rhys Davids.⁷ Schokker himself made a translation of the Pādatāditaka, in which he translated from Sanskrit into Dutch, and a native English speaker then translated from Dutch into English⁸. Theoretically this approach to the problem should have overcome all problems, but the method, although having advantages, is not fault-free. It produced, for example, such solecisms as "offer" for "offering" in the phrase "surrounded by crows which have settled down when the offer was thrown down",⁹ because the English translator had no knowledge of Sanskrit and could not check against the original, while the Dutch translator was not sufficiently competent in English to be able to check the final version.

2. Translating from Pāli

2.1 The nature of Pāli

If we now turn to the problem of producing an English translation of a Pāli text, it can be seen that if we choose an early canonical *sutta* ascribed to the Buddha or one of his disciples, then our aim must be to assess the meaning which the text had for those who heard it in the historical and social background in which it was first uttered, i.e. its meaning to the Buddha's contemporaries. We must then transmit this meaning to English readers. It is, however, not always understood by non-specialists that an early Pāli canonical *sutta* is itself a translation,

and forms which have been left untranslated can sometimes be seen.¹⁰ Although it may be possible to translate such Pāli texts into English, we must, if our aim is to establish its meaning for the original hearers, first find out what the author actually said, i.e. we must "back-translate" the text into a form of language as close as possible to that which we believe was spoken at the time of the Buddha.¹¹

This involves making use of all the resources of linguistic and literary criticism to establish the original form of the text which we wish to translate, which requires a knowledge of the languages of North India and Ceylon at the time of the Buddha and the centuries immediately after his death. This in turn necessitates expertise not only in the Middle Indo-Aryan languages, of which Pāli is one, but also in classical and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, since much of the language of early Buddhist texts is related to or taken over from Sanskrit, while parallel versions of many Pāli canonical texts exist in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit.

It may be that a would-be translator is unwilling, or even unable, to spend time and energy on such a major undertaking, and may decide to translate the Pāli text "as it stands". Even this presents problems, because the canonical Pāli texts have been transmitted down to the present day through a number of traditions, at times independent, at times commingled in a confusing way, so that we now possess manuscripts, and printed editions based upon them, from Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, Laos, and Thailand, which may well all differ in certain respects, while the editions published by the Pāli Text Society are of an eclectic nature, being based upon manuscripts and editions from various traditions. All such traditions should be consulted by anyone wishing to make an accurate text upon which to base his translation.

If a translator wishes to simplify his task even more, by restricting himself to (say) the Sinhalese tradition, then his problems are not yet over, since many *suttas* are found in more than one place in the canon, and a comparison shows that they do not always agree. A translator must decide whether he can ignore such parallel versions, if they help with the interpretation of the text he is translating. To give a specific example: a comparison between those verses ascribed to the *thera* Vaṅgīsa which are found in the *Theragāthā*,¹² the *Samyutta-nikāya*,¹³ and the *Sutta-nipāta*,¹⁴ shows that the verses preserved by the *bhāṇakas* ("reciters")¹⁵ of the *Samyutta-*

and Khuddaka-nikāyas do not agree in every way, although it is, of course, possible that Vaṅgīsa repeated his verses in different ways on different occasions, so that all the various traditions are simultaneously correct. The same may apply to those verses in the Sutta-nipāta which have variant readings included among the explanations given in the Niddesa.¹⁶ It is possible that both the text of the Sutta-nipāta and the readings given in the Niddesa are equally authentic. Such a belief, however, presents difficulties when we come to consider Buddhaghosa's commentary¹⁷ upon the Sutta-nipāta, because he records still more variant readings and different explanations, showing that in the tradition which he came to Ceylon to consult in the Mahāvihāra there were preserved readings and exegesis in addition to those which had been preserved in the Niddesa tradition. The task of unravelling these problems must be faced before we can reconstitute the text we wish to translate.

If the would-be translator, finally wearied by all these problems, states his intention to translate (say) the Sutta-nipāta according to the Sinhalese tradition, without confusing himself by reference to commentaries and parallel versions elsewhere, then he must still decide which edition he will translate, and whether he will be influenced in any way by alternative readings which may be listed in the footnotes to that edition.

2.2 Understanding a Pāli text

It may be obvious that those who wish to translate a Pāli text should first be competent in Pāli, but in fact the school of "intuitive" translators is no less strong in Pāli than in any other field, and many translations have been made by those without any formal training in the Pāli language. Assuming that the would-be translator is in fact well trained in Pāli, then it must be stressed that the task of translating involves both understanding and communicating. It is sometimes quite easy to communicate but very difficult to understand, i.e. it is easy to translate if this means simply the giving of an equivalent in the second language of a phrase which is linguistically simple, but contextually difficult, in the first language, so that the resultant "translation" is so imprecise that it can only be misleading or completely uninformative. Professor O'Flaherty has pointed out the difficulty of understanding the phrase

"we have become immortal" in the Ṛgveda,¹⁸ since such a translation gives no hint of the meaning of "immortal" in a particular context.

Comparable examples exist in Pāli. In the Uraga-sutta of the Sutta-nipāta we find the refrain *so bhikkhu jahāti oraṭāraṃ urago jīṇṇam iva tacaṃ purāṇaṃ*.¹⁹ This is very easy to convert into English, since the meaning of every word is well known: "That monk leaves behind this shore and the far shore as a snake leaves behind its old skin." We need, however, to understand what the phrase "this shore and the far shore" means. In some Pāli texts "this shore" means "this existence" and "the far shore" means "nibbāna". The commentary upon the Sutta-nipāta gives a number of explanations,²⁰ because at the time when the commentator wrote in the fifth century A.D. the idea of leaving behind the far shore in the form of *nibbāna* was a Mahāyāna idea, which as a Theravādin he was very reluctant to accept. To understand the phrase therefore entails the discussion of the question whether the Mahāyāna idea could have been in existence at the time when the *sutta* was composed, and, if not, what "far shore" could mean in this context.

Similarly, there is a problem in the understanding of the word *amata* "not dead" in the phrase *apāpur' etaṃ matassa dvāraṃ*,²¹ which translated literally means "open this door of the not dead". Miss Horner gives two slightly different translations of this phrase in close proximity: "Open this door of deathlessness"²² and "Opened . . . are the doors of the Deathless".²³ It is clear that the nature of the problem is very similar to that raised by Professor O'Flaherty with regard to the meaning of "immortal". We must first understand the meaning of *amata* before we can communicate the meaning to others.²⁴

What does it mean when it is said that a text should be translated in the light of its social, historical, and cultural background? In the case of a text ascribed to the Buddha it means that we must try to reconstitute the social and cultural background of North India at the time of the Buddha, which includes trying to find out all that we can about the other religious teachers in that area at that time. There is also the problem of the nature of the Buddha whose cultural background we are aiming to establish. The Hīnayāna schools (and if we are dealing with Pāli then we are dealing with a Hīnayāna school) insist upon the thoroughly human character of the Buddha,²⁵ and we should therefore be con-

tent to regard his utterances as human utterances. We do not have to face the problems which arise when translating some Mahāyāna texts, which sometimes seem to expound a teaching at variance with that found elsewhere in the Buddha's discourses, although the Mahāyāna schools would deny any such variance, and state that the Buddha's discourses are to be explained as teaching meant only for the simple.²⁶ Translating a text promulgated in such circumstances presents special difficulties.

What can be done about establishing the social and cultural background of a composite text, such as the Sutta-nipāta? It is first necessary to try to fix the time of composition of such a text, which might conceivably cover a period as long as three hundred years. Besides the problem of trying to assess the relative dating of the various portions of the text — no simple task — there is also the difficulty presented by the development of a language during such a period of time. It is obvious that many words, perhaps most words, can be used in more than one sense. It is also obvious that in a composite text, whose composition was perhaps spread over three hundred years, the meanings of some words must have changed, perhaps even in the same context. Professor Brough has quoted the story about monks whose texts had become so changed and corrupted by the phonological and morphological development of the language that what had originally been the Sanskrit compound *udaya-vyaya* "arising and passing away" had developed into *udaka-baka* "a water-heron".²⁷ Although the changes which occur in Pāli are not so violent, the story is informative in that it shows how the reciters of texts were sometimes capable of forgetting completely the correct meaning of a text.

What aids are available to a translator to enable him to understand a Pāli text? In the first place there is the evidence of the ancient commentarial traditions. Such commentaries may have been composed in their present form many centuries after the time of the Buddha,²⁸ but there are grounds for believing that some of the interpretations and exegesis they contain dates from a much earlier time, perhaps even from the time of the Buddha himself,²⁹ although in most cases there is no means of dating such material accurately. Since the commentaries are so much later than the texts upon which they comment, it is clear that they are the product of a different social and historical background. It can be seen

that for this reason the information given in the commentaries is sometimes misleading, and occasionally incorrect. There is consequently the possibility that the portions of the commentaries which cannot be checked may also be misleading or incorrect.

If, for example, we wish to find the meaning of the phrase *tasā vā thāvarā vā*³⁰ we might look in a Sanskrit dictionary to find the meaning of the related Sanskrit words. There we shall find that *trasa* means "moving" = "the collective body of moving or living beings" (opposed to *sthāvara*).³¹ If we refer to *sthāvara* in the same dictionary we shall find that it means "standing still, not moving, fixed, stable, immovable".³² In Sanskrit, therefore, the phrase means "(all creatures) moving or unmoving". By the time the Pāli commentary was written, however, the meaning of the words had been extended. The commentator states: *tasā, sa-taṇhānaṃ sa-bhayaṇaṃ c' etaṃ adhivacanaṃ; tiṭṭhanti ti thāvarā, pahīnatanhāgamanānaṃ arahantānaṃ etaṃ adhivacanaṃ*³³ — "*tasā* is a synonym for those who have cravings or fears; *thāvara* means that they are standing still. This is a synonym for those who are rid of their cravings, i.e. *arahats*". To the commentator, therefore, the phrase had taken on a Buddhist flavour: "Ordinary individuals who still had cravings, and *arahats* who were freed from them". This explains why Miss Horner translated the compound *tasā-thāvara* as "those who have craving and those who have none",³⁴ although it is very likely that to the original hearers the meaning was far less restricted.

Where the commentators no longer knew the meanings of words, they sometimes had to deduce them by means of etymologies which we can see are incorrect. In Pāli the consonant cluster in the word *-jñā* "knowing" becomes *-ññ*. The consonant cluster *-ny-* also becomes *-ññ*. In the word *vadaññu*, which is derived from Sanskrit *vadānya* "bountiful, liberal, munificent, a munificent giver" or "eloquent, speaking kindly or agreeably, affable",³⁵ the commentators have wrongly taken the final element *-ññu* to be from *-jñā*, and the word is explained as *vacanavidu*,³⁶ i.e. understanding *vadaññu* as the equivalent of *vada-jñā* "knowing the utterance (of the Buddha)". Another development from Sanskrit *-jñā* is Pāli *-jīna*, with a *svarabhakti* (epenthetic) vowel evolved between *-j-* and *-ñ-*. The resultant form is identical with the word *jīna* "conqueror", and the commentaries con-

sequently explain the compound *magga-jīna*³⁷ "knowing the road" as "conqueror (of the defilements) by means of the road".³⁸

There is a view put forward by certain philosophers of language that all possible meanings are innate in an utterance, whether or not the author intended them, and whether or not they were extractable from the utterance at the time of its production. Such a point of view greatly appeals to some modern poets and writers, since it enables them to claim as their own any meaning which readers can extract from their works, irrespective of whether the author intended it or not. If we were to follow this school of thought, then we should have to admit that it is acceptable for each generation to interpret an utterance from the past in any way it pleases, even if it involves a gross anachronism. More important, all the alternative meanings put forward by different generations would simultaneously be valid, in so far as they were possible meanings. This would have no bearing on impossible interpretations of the type I have mentioned.

I do not wish to take sides in this philosophical discussion. I would merely say that a translator who tried to give all possible interpretations would find the task of producing a readable translation virtually impossible. Although this point of view would justify a modern translator giving the sense which an ancient text had for him, I would merely stress my own view that we should try to find out the sense which it had for the original hearers. This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that the original hearers may have misunderstood the speaker, and may have read into his words something other than the meaning he intended.

As another aid in understanding a Pāli text, there is the possibility of asking modern interpreters, e.g. *bhikkhus* and *theras* who have learned the meaning of the texts from their teachers. This meaning may be the same as that handed down by the ancient commentators, but it is not necessarily so, because once again they may be interpreting in a different social and historical background. There is moreover the chance that such modern commentators may be able to interpret difficult passages in the ancient commentaries, and perhaps even to decide between the relative merits of alternative meanings given by the ancient commentators.

There is also the aid afforded by versions of the same or similar texts belonging to schools of Buddhism other than the Theravāda, i.e.

Prakrit or Sanskrit versions, or Chinese and Tibetan translations of such versions. It is important to note that the Prakrit and Sanskrit versions are, like the Pāli texts, translations. It sometimes happens that there are Pāli, Prakrit, and Sanskrit versions of a text, as well as Chinese and Tibetan translations of these or other versions,³⁹ and so, in theory, there are many aids to help with the understanding of the Pāli text. Although this is so in theory, in practice parallel versions sometimes raise problems rather than solving them, e.g. where the Pāli Jātaka text has the word *chambī*,⁴⁰ which can be without difficulty translated as "afraid", the Sanskrit parallel in the Jātakamālā has *ṣaḍbhiḥ* "by six".⁴¹ Although it is possible to deduce the way in which such variants can occur,⁴² it is not always possible to decide which of two such variants is more likely to be the original reading.

Fourthly, we can regard it as probable that if we find in a Pāli text a word which also occurs in non-Pāli texts of the same period, the word is being used in the same sense as in those other texts, unless there are clear indications that it is deliberately being used in a different sense, since the Buddha sometimes borrowed brahmanical terms and re-interpreted them. We can therefore look at texts written on similar subjects at the same time in neighbouring parts of India, by thinkers who were facing similar problems, and employing languages with a similar structure and vocabulary. If we find similar words, phrases or ideas in such contemporary sources, then it seems likely that their usage is similar, and their meaning is also similar. If the meaning can be clearly seen, then this may help us to understand a passage in Pāli where the meaning may be obscure. Such a method of working has been employed with considerable success in the task of translating the R̥gveda, where the language can be shown to have close resemblances with that of Old Iranian texts.⁴³ It has been shown convincingly that a number of words which occur only once or twice in the R̥gveda, in contexts which are obscure and give no guide to the meaning, can have plausible meanings assigned to them on the basis of the usage of cognate forms found in Iranian, in circumstances where the meaning can be deduced without any possibility of doubt from the context where they occur.

It is well known that a large amount of vocabulary, both technical and otherwise, is common to both Buddhism and Jainism,⁴⁴ and

in view of the close proximity of the original homes of these two religions, it is probable that similar words used in similar contexts in their texts have similar meanings. There is, however, need for great caution when using this method of ascertaining meanings, for there are exceptions, where we can see that the usage is different, e.g. of the word *āsava*. The etymology of this word (the preposition *ā* "towards" + the root *śru-* "to flow") implies something flowing in, and this suits the Jain usage well, since in Jainism the *āsavas* are influences which flow into a person, and discolour his soul.⁴⁵ This does not suit the Buddhist idea, where the *āsavas* are not attributes which are capable of flowing into a person. They are, in fact, identical with the four *oghas* "floods",⁴⁶ and it seems clear that the word has been borrowed into Buddhism, perhaps from Jainism, but more likely both religions borrowed it from a third, and the original meaning has been lost. So, although the translation "influence" or "influx" suits the Jain usage well, on etymological and exegetical grounds, it is not entirely satisfactory for Buddhism. This accounts for the number of translations which have been suggested for the word, including "cankers", "passions", "intoxicants", and "cravings".⁴⁷

If we are correct in dating the great Upaniṣads at about 600 B.C., and the Buddha and Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, at about 500 B.C., then it would seem likely that these two religious leaders were preaching at a time when Upaniṣadic ideas were well known in North India. It would therefore seem likely that any technical terminology they employed which has parallels in the Upaniṣads would be heard by those who were already conversant with the Upaniṣadic usage. It is, for example, clear from the way in which the Buddha was able to assume that his hearers understood such concepts as *nicca* "permanent", *anicca* "impermanent", *sukha* "happiness", and *dukkha* "misery",⁴⁸ that they had already heard preachers speaking about such things. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it would therefore seem likely that any mention the Buddha made of *attā* "self" and *anattā* "not self" would be interpreted, rightly or wrongly, by his hearers in the light of Upaniṣadic usage. This being so, it is hard to see why almost all writers about Buddhism accept the statement often made that the Buddha makes no mention of the Upaniṣadic concept of a Universal Self.⁴⁹ When the Buddha stated that everything was *anattā* "not self", we should expect that the view

of *attā* "self" which he was denying was that held by other preachers of that time. We can, in fact, deduce, from what the Buddha rejected, the doctrine which other preachers upheld. When the Buddha said: "*rūpa* 'form' etc. are not mine", he was denying the view that there is no distinction between knower and known – the standard *advaita* "non-dual" doctrine.⁵⁰ Once we know that the Buddha was using words in this way, then we are aided in our attempt to translate them.

2.3 Transmitting the meaning of the Pāli

When the translator has chosen the text he wishes to translate, and has persuaded himself that he knows what it means, then he comes to the third part of his task – that of putting the meaning into clear readable English. I have already noted that it is difficult for non-English speakers to write good English, but not all English people can write good English either, and in the field of translations of Buddhist texts there has recently been an excess of what has been called "Buddhist Hybrid English", described as "a bastardized form of the English language so hag-ridden by Sanskrit syntax that almost every sentence is constructed in the passive, (and) every technical term is translated by a series of hyphenated poly-syllables".⁵¹ Professor Gombrich has commented upon this matter in a general way: "We are not very good at English",⁵² and also in a specific way with reference to individual scholars: "But the work of these great scholars who would surely castigate any lapse from Sanskrit or Tibetan idiom in others or in themselves, makes me wonder yet again why it is that in our own field *English* style is held of no account."⁵³

Why do scholars write in Buddhist Hybrid English? I confess that I myself, to some extent, am guilty of this. Of the quality of English I used in the two volumes of *Elders' Verses* I wrote: "I have therefore tried as far as possible to produce a literal, almost word-for-word translation. In some places this has resulted in a starkness and austerity of words which borders upon the ungrammatical in English, but will, I hope, when considered alongside the original Pāli adequately convey my understanding of the *theras'* words."⁵⁴ This, I think, makes the situation clear as far as I myself am concerned. I wrote in that way because of a re-action against

the "intuitive" method of translation. Not only was I trying to understand the grammar and syntax of the Pāli, but I was also trying to show my readers the way in which I understood it, so that they could, if they wished, put my translation against the original and see precisely "how I was taking the Pāli". I am not the only translator to be conscious of the deficiencies in his English style. Pe Maung Tin said of his translation of the *Atthasālinī*: "I have therefore tried to be as literal as possible even to the extent of sometimes sacrificing style to clearness."⁵⁵

Having noted Professor Gombrich's stricture that a literal translation is "an intellectual fallacy and an aesthetic monstrosity",⁵⁶ and having made up his mind that the English he will write will not be open to any such criticism, the next decision the translator will have to make — if he is dealing with a verse text — is whether his translation will be into English verse or prose. The controversy about whether poetry should be translated into poetry or prose is an old one, and little can be said that has not already been put forward as an argument on one side or the other. My own feeling in this matter is that the verse form in English is properly the province of poets, so that no-one should try to write poetry unless he is a poet. A translation made into poor poetry may well persuade the reader that the original text is in equally bad poetry. It is difficult enough to produce an accurate translation. To turn a translation into poetry leads to a situation such as that of the English translation of the *Jātakas*,⁵⁷ where poor poetry masks a worse translation, and gives a misleading impression of the original. Good prose would always seem to be preferable to bad poetry, except that, as Professor Brough has pointed out, in prose "only the sense-content of the original, and not a poetical form, is presented as evidence".⁵⁸ The reader finds nothing of the other feelings which a poetic form might have portrayed to the original hearers.

In the case of most early Pāli literature in verse, the problem is not so acute, since for the most part the *theras* who composed Pāli verses were not, with very few exceptions, poets. They composed in verse simply because in ancient India that was the medium for epigrams, gnomic utterances, and a great deal of didactic literature. It is doubtful whether such verses conveyed much of a poetic nature to the hearers, and the amount lost when a prose translation is adopted is correspondingly less.

When he has made that decision, the translator is in a position where he can give thought to the actual mechanism whereby he will produce his translation. If he is to follow the principle that one and the same Pāli word should always be translated by the same English word (when it is used in the same sense), as the Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli advocated,⁵⁹ and as a counterpart to this that each different Pāli word should be translated by a different English word, then he has to decide whether he can find an English equivalent for each Pāli word in the original text, and whether there are sufficient near-synonyms in English for all the groups of near-synonyms which frequently occur in Pāli.⁶⁰ The answer will almost certainly be "No", for Sanskrit and Pāli are far richer in synonyms than English. It is said, for example, that there are fifty words for "lotus" in Sanskrit,⁶¹ and the same is probably true for Pāli. English has but the one word "lotus", although this can be augmented and differentiated to some extent by the use of adjectives, e.g. "blue lotus", "white lotus", etc. It follows then that a translator is frequently forced to extend the range of the standard vocabulary of modern English by having recourse to words which are not in every-day use. Since the use of poetic and archaic words in an English translation gives to that translation a nuance which is almost certainly not in the original Pāli, such words should not in general be used.

It is frequently said by translators that, as "there is no direct English equivalent" for a particular Pāli word, they will leave it untranslated. Such a statement has been made, for example, in respect of the word *piṭṭi*, sometimes translated as "zest", "exuberance", "rapture" or "ecstasy", by a translator who felt that such terms were not adequate as a translation.⁶² It is, however, difficult to reconcile this practice of leaving words untranslated with our stated aim that the translation should be "intelligible to the non-specialist". A translation which leaves words untranslated is only intelligible, in respect of those words, to someone who knows the language of the original text, i.e. a specialist. If a translation is only intelligible to the specialist, who can, if he wishes, read it in the original, then what is the point of making the translation? High praise has been accorded to La Vallée Poussin for leaving the technical term *tathāgatagarbha* untranslated, whereby he avoided the pitfalls of "bad" philology (encountered by those who had trans-

lated it wrongly).⁶³ We are left to wonder whether La Vallée Poussin actually understood the meaning of the term and, if he did, what use it was to his readers to be deprived of that knowledge.

The use of such untranslated words in a translation leads to a situation where the reader does not understand the meaning of what is being translated. There is a failure of communication, which the translator perhaps does not realize. He may have searched the English language for an equivalent to a particular Pāli word and, failing to find one, has left the Pāli word untranslated. He knows, within limits, the meaning of the word; it is only the one-to-one equivalent he cannot find. He can therefore understand his own translation, because he subconsciously inserts his own interpretation every time he comes to the untranslated word. The ordinary reader, however, cannot do this because he does not know the meaning, even within limits, unless there is a footnote, which may have to be lengthy, explaining the meaning of the word the first time it occurs. Such a practice is rarely followed, and would scarcely be practicable in the normal type of translation, which has a minimum of such notes. To follow this practice would necessitate the provision of a lengthy commentary, by the translator himself, almost certainly longer than the translation. This is the method I myself have adopted for my translations of the Thera- and Therī-gāthā,⁶⁴ and will adopt again for my translation of the Sutta-nipāta, which is in the process of being prepared for publication.⁶⁵

Even with the provision of explanatory notes of this kind, a translator must beware of leaving too many words untranslated. If this is done, then one arrives at a situation where a translation may be "alas so literal and so full of foreign words that it hardly reads as English".⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the alternative is not always satisfactory. If a translator decides to make use of an English word or phrase whose meaning is not likely to have much significance to the reader, then it is hard to decide which of two unsatisfactory renderings is preferable. A reader may well object if the epithet *khīṇāsava* is left untranslated, but does the translation "canker-waned"⁶⁷ mean more to him?

If a decision is made to provide an English equivalent for very Pāli word, then problems arise from the fact that any English words which he uses are considered by the reader in the light of his own cultural background. For most English readers this means a Christian background,

whether they are Christians themselves or not. The most convenient English equivalents may well be misleading because they have a Christian connotation, e.g. "monk", "nun", "monastery", or "Lent" (which is used by some translators as a translation for *vassa-vāsa* "rainy-period residence"). Even when a word is not specifically Christian, nevertheless it often has Christian undertones, which a reader may find hard to discard, e.g. "sin", "faith", etc., since despite themselves Christian readers tend to give Christian values to such words.

For this reason, some words give a misleading impression when translated. If we translate Pāli *deva* as "god", it gives to a Christian reader the impression of a monotheistic omnipotent God (with a capital G-), or else the idea of a group of pagan gods (with a small g-). Either idea is inappropriate in Buddhism, where the word is used of some sort of supernormal superhuman being. It is considerations like this which force translators occasionally to reconsider their view that all words should be translated.

Problems arise for the translator when words which have a technical sense in non-Buddhist texts are used in Pāli in a non-technical (or at least a different technical) sense, e.g. *nahātaka*. For a brahman the Sanskrit word *snātaka* had a special meaning: "one who has performed the ceremonial lustrations required after finishing his studentship as a *brahmacārin*". The word was adopted by the Buddha, but the brahmanical meaning was abandoned, and metaphorical meanings were evolved for it. To use the simple word "washed" as a translation sounds banal in English when used of the Buddhist élite, but the archaic and dialect word "washen"⁶⁸ sounds somewhat comical. The same problem arises with the other brahmanical technical terms which the Buddha borrowed, beginning with the word *brāhmaṇa* itself. How far is a translator to give such words the meaning they had in their brahmanical environment, and how far is he to try to find some sort of metaphorical translation for them?

There are many words which have a technical sense in later Buddhism, and yet are found in non-Buddhist literature without any such technical sense. It is often a matter of dispute as to whether the technical sense was acquired at an early or a late stage of Buddhism. For this reason it is very important to try to put the text being translated into its social and historical background, for it is possible that in the very earliest stage of Buddhism such words might still have had their non-technical meaning, e.g.

nibbata and *nibbāna* might still have had the meanings "quenched" and "quenching" in early Pāli texts.⁶⁹

Cultural change can also lead to a situation where a word or phrase which in its original setting was quite appropriate nevertheless sounds strange to another generation of hearers. In Sanskrit and Pāli problems arise in respect of adjectives describing personal appearance, beauty, etc. Professor Brough has pointed out the effect which such phrases as "Lady with fine buttocks" have upon English readers.⁷⁰ In the same way, it is probable that such epithets of the Buddha as *narāsabha* "bull among men" may seem to be risible to modern Buddhists. If, however, our intention is to give the meaning as it might have appeared to the Buddha's contemporaries, then we must try to deduce whether such an epithet meant more to them than "powerful", irrespective of the effect upon twentieth century readers. In the case of adjectives denoting feminine beauty, it is clear from the evidence afforded by sculptures in the centuries after the Buddha's death that those living at the time did have a preference for women with large breasts and hips, and minute waists, so that we may assume that epithets of the type mentioned were really intended to be taken literally, and we should translate accordingly. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it would seem reasonable to suggest that we do the same with epithets denoting animal-like qualities.

Faced with the problem of finding translations for specific words, the translator will often find that he is to some extent constrained by the structure of English vocabulary. If he wishes to translate the common pair of opposites in Pāli *pamatta* "careless" and its negative *appamatta* "careful", he may feel that these English words seem rather mundane in a religious context, and the same is even more true of the translations "carelessness" and "carefulness" for the related nouns *pamāda* and *appamāda*. The root *mad-*, which underlies *pamatta*, means "to be intoxicated", and *pamatta* refers to someone whose mind is befuddled, not necessarily by drink, in such a way that his attention is distracted. For this reason the translation "negligent" is sometimes adopted instead of "careless". There is, however, no formal opposite of "negligent" in English, so the translation of *appamatta* is difficult. The word "diligent" which is sometimes adopted for it perhaps gives some idea of verbal relationship because the words sound similar, although they

are not directly related in English. "Diligent", however, properly means "hard-working", which can only give a misleading idea of the antithesis between *pamatta* and *appamatta* in Pāli.

The problem which the translation of Pāli *deva* presents has already been mentioned. The abstract noun *devatā* which is formed from *deva* is sometimes used as a synonym for *deva*, as well as in an abstract sense. This can be conveniently translated as "deity" or "divinity", since both English words are used as abstract words and also as a synonym for "god". Unfortunately, neither "deity" nor "divinity" provide any word in English which can be used as a translation for *deva*, since there is no simplex term from "deity". There is the simplex "divine" from "divinity", but this word is unsuitable for our purposes, as it can be used in English of a human being.

A very real problem is presented by a small group of words which have a number of clearly attested meanings in different contexts. One of the prime difficulties is the word *dhamma*. In my translation of the Theragāthā I listed nine different meanings which occur in that text,⁷¹ and I was not attempting to be exhaustive. The commentator Buddhaghosa gives a fourfold definition of the word.⁷² The problem is not only to find adequate translations for the different usages, but also to decide which precise meaning is intended in any particular context, for contexts are frequently ambiguous. To overcome this problem Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, who had used at least six equivalents in his translation of the Visuddhimagga,⁷³ maintained that the valuable words "idea" and "ideal" could be used to render *dhamma* for almost all instances.⁷⁴ This is, however, stretching the English usage of these two words to their limit, and the suggestion is not entirely successful, although perhaps no less successful than that of the translators who make no attempt to translate but retain the word *dhamma* untranslated.

3. Why do we translate Pāli?

Why do translators translate Pāli? Some translate because they are interested in Pāli as a language or Pāli literature as literature, and they wish others, not capable of reading the texts in the original language, to have the chance of knowing something about them and their contents. Others translate because they have read translations of Pāli texts and are not satisfied with what they have read, but believe that they

could make the contents known more accurately, i.e. they think they can do better than their predecessors.

There are undoubtedly some who translate because they wish to proselytize. They regard the contents of the texts as revealed truths which they wish to make known to others in order to persuade them to join their religion. It is debatable how far this can be consistent with the need to be impartial, which is essential if one is to be accurate in one's translation. Is it possible simultaneously to be impartial and to wish to proselytize? If it is not, then it must be asked whether an adherent of a religion or a philosophy should attempt to write about his own religion or philosophy. The reviewer of a recent book about Buddhism asked whether a book about Buddhism should not be written by a Buddhist.⁷⁵ To this one might be tempted to put the oft-quoted counter: Should not a history of the Borgias be written by a Pope?

Am I saying that a Buddhist cannot translate a Buddhist text? No, but I am saying that while he is translating it he must be prepared to put his personal beliefs and faith on one side, and concentrate upon the "kind of truth . . . which is open to discussion and verification in the open arena of the academy".⁷⁶ That is the kind of truth which must be the aim of all who strive to make translations.

NOTES

- 1 Paul J. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English: Some notes on philology and hermeneutics for Buddhologists", in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 4.2 (1981), pp. 17-32 (p. 19).
- 2 Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, Review of B. L. Ogibenin: *Structure d'un mythe védique: le mythe cosmogonique dans le Rgveda*, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 38 (1975), pp. 173-75 (p. 173).
- 3 John Brough, *Poems from the Sanskrit*, Penguin Books, London 1968, p. 23.
- 4 M. R. Kale, *The Vikramorvaśyam of Kālidāsa*, 11th edition, Delhi 1967, p. 217.
- 5 See Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford 1899, s.v. *vimāna*.
- 6 G. H. Schokker, *The Pāṭalāditaka of Śyāmīlaka*, Vol. II, Dordrecht 1976, p. vii.
- 7 Shwe Zan Aung & Mrs Rhys Davids, *Points of Controversy*, Pali Text Society, London 1915, pp. 11-12.
- 8 Schokker, *op. cit.* (in note 6), p. vii.
- 9 Schokker, *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 10 E. g. in Theragāthā 1279 (*sacce atthe ca dhamme ca āhu santo patitthitā*), *sacce* is probably the locative case, while *atthe* and *dhamme* are in the nominative case. See K. R. Norman, *Elders' Verses I*, Pali Text Society, London 1969, p. 292.
- 11 The latest views on this subject can be seen in H. Bechert (ed.): *The language of the earliest Buddhist tradition*, Göttingen 1980.
- 12 Theragāthā 1209-79.
- 13 Saṃyutta-nikāya, Vol. I, pp. 185 foll.
- 14 Sutta-nipāta 451-54 = Theragāthā 1227-30; Sutta-nipāta 343-58 = Theragāthā 1263-78.
- 15 Whose task it was to preserve the text of the works entrusted to their care.
- 16 The Niddesa is a canonical text commenting upon two vaggas and one individual sutta of the Sutta-nipāta. See K. R. Norman, *Pāli Literature*, Wiesbaden 1983, p. 129.
- 17 Paramatthajotikā, Vol. II, Parts 1-3, Pali Text Society, London 1916-18. This commentary is perhaps not by Buddhaghosa, but this is irrelevant to my purpose here.
- 18 Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda*, Penguin Books, London 1981, p. 15.
- 19 Sutta-nipāta 1-17.
- 20 Paramatthajotikā, Vol. II, pp. 12-14, discussed by John Brough, *The Gāndhārī Dharmapada*, London 1962, pp. 201 foll.
- 21 Majjhima-nikāya, Vol. I, pp. 168-69.
- 22 I. B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, Pali Text Society, London 1954, p. 212.
- 23 Horner, *ibid.*, p. 213.
- 24 If *amata* here means *nibbāna*, then we can explain the phrase as "open the door to *nibbāna*", i.e. tell everyone how they may gain *nibbāna*.
- 25 H. V. Guenther, "Presidential address to the third conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies", in *Journal of IABS*, Vol. 4.2 (1981), pp. 115-23 (p. 117).
- 26 E. J. Thomas, *The history of Buddhist thought*, London 1933, p. 213.
- 27 John Brough, *op. cit.* (in note 20), pp. 45 foll.
- 28 Buddhaghosa probably lived in the first quarter of the fifth century A. D., while Dhammapāla probably lived during the sixth century.
- 29 See K. R. Norman, "The dialects in which the Buddha preached", in H. Bechert, *op. cit.* (in note 11), pp. 61-77 (p. 73).
- 30 Sutta-nipāta 146.
- 31 See Monier-Williams, *op. cit.* (in note 5), s. v. *trasa*.
- 32 See Monier-Williams, *ibid.*, s. v. *sthāvara*.
- 33 Paramatthajotikā, Vol. I, p. 245 (*ad Khuddakapātha IX. 4 = Sutta-nipāta 146*).
- 34 I. B. Horner, *Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. II, Pali Text Society, London 1957, p. 290 (= *Majjhima-nikāya*, Vol. II, p. 105).
- 35 See Monier-Williams, *op. cit.* (in note 5), s. v. *vaḍḍya*.
- 36 Paramatthajotikā, Vol. II, p. 415 (*ad Sutta-nipāta 487*).
- 37 Sutta-nipāta 84.
- 38 Paramatthajotikā, Vol. II, p. 162: *maggajino ā maggena sabbakilese vijitāvi*.
- 39 E.g. there are of the Dhammapada two Prakrit versions, a Sanskrit version (the Udānavarga) in two recensions, a Tibetan translation which seems to differ somewhat from the Sanskrit recensions, and four Chinese versions.

- 40 Jātaka Vol. IV, p. 310: so bajjhatū pāsasatehi chambhī: "Let him be bound, fearful, with hundreds of bonds." The commentary does, however, include the number "six" in the explanation.
- 41 Jātaka-mālā XIX. 22: saḍbhir dṛḍhaiḥ pāsasatiḥ sa bandhaṃ prāpnotu; "Let him undergo binding with six hundred bonds."
- 42 In this example it is probably due to a confusion in a writing system where the symbol for -mbh- could be confused with that for -bbh-, perhaps because the dot which signified anusvāra (-m-) was indistinguishable from the dot which was used to denote a double consonant.
- 43 H. W. Bailey, "A half-century of Irano-Indian studies", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1972, pp. 99-110.
- 44 L. Alsdorf, *Les études jaina: état présent et tâches futures*, Paris 1965, pp. 3-6.
- 45 W. Schubring, *The doctrine of the Jainas*, Delhi 1962, §§ 84, 97.
- 46 The āsavas and the oghas are kāma "sensual pleasure", bhava "existence", diṭṭhi "speculative view", and avijjā "ignorance".
- 47 See K. R. Norman, *Elders' Verses I*, Pali Text Society, London 1969, pp. 133-34.
- 48 See K. R. Norman, "A note on attā in the Alagaddūpama-sutta", in *Studies in Indian Philosophy*, Ahmedabad 1981, pp. 19-29 (p. 22).
- 49 See E. J. Thomas, *The life of the Buddha*, London 1927, p. 35.
- 50 See Karl H. Potter, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, Vol. III (Advaita Vedānta up to Śaṅkara and his pupils), Princeton 1981, p. 6.
- 51 Griffiths, *op. cit.* (in note 1), p. 24.
- 52 Richard Gombrich, *On being Sanskritic* (An inaugural lecture), Oxford 1978, p. 27.
- 53 Richard Gombrich, Review of L. Cousins (et al.): *Buddhist studies in honour of I.B. Horner*, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1977, pp. 132-33 (p. 132).
- 54 K. R. Norman, *Elders' Verses I*, Pali Text Society, London 1969, p. xxxii, and *Elders' Verses II*, Pali Text Society, London 1971, p. xxxiv.
- 55 Pe Maung Tin & Mrs Rhys Davids, *The expositor*, Vol. I, Pali Text Society, London 1920, p. xiv.
- 56 Richard Gombrich, *op. cit.* (in note 52), p. 27.
- 57 *The Jātaka, or stories of the Buddha's former births*, Cambridge 1895-1907.
- 58 John Brough, *op. cit.* (in note 3), p. 19.
- 59 A. K. Warder, in his introduction to Bhikkhu Nānamoli (tr.): *The path of discrimination*, Pali Text Society, London 1982, p. vi.
- 60 See M. G. Dhadhale, *Synonymic collocations in the Tipiṭaka*, Poona 1980, pp. 1-57.
- 61 John Brough, *op. cit.* (in note 3), p. 31.
- 62 L. S. Cousins, "Buddhist jhāna: its nature and attainment according to the Pāli sources", in *Religion*, Vol. III. 2 (1973), pp. 115-31 (p. 122).
- 63 H. V. Guenther, *op. cit.* (in n. 25), p. 123 note 8.
- 64 See note 54.
- 65 To be published by the Pali Text Society in 1984.
- 66 Richard Gombrich, *op. cit.* (in note 53), p. 132.
- 67 As adopted by N. A. Jayawickrama, in *Epochs of the Conqueror*, Pali Text Society, London 1968.
- 68 Adopted by L. B. Horner, e.g. in *Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I (see note 22), p. 334.
- 69 As I suggested in *Elders' Verses I* (see note 47), p. xxxiii.
- 70 John Brough, *op. cit.* (in note 3), p. 33.
- 71 K. R. Norman, *op. cit.* (in note 47), p. 118.
- 72 See T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, London 1925, s.v. dhamma.
- 73 Bhikkhu Nānamoli, *The path of purification*, Colombo 1956.
- 74 Bhikkhu Nānamoli, *The Minor Readings and Illustrator*, Pali Text Society, London 1960, p. 331.
- 75 Garry Thomson, Review of S. Collins: *Selfless persons*, in *The Middle Way*, Vol. 57.4 pp. 231-33, (p. 231).
- 76 Griffiths, *op. cit.* (in note 1), p. 22.