

# Method and Theory in the Study of Buddhism: Textual Study and Translation

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September 28, 2011

## General Methodologies for Religious Studies

According to Friedrich Heiler, the research method in religious studies may draw simultaneously upon all the valuable knowledge supplied by ethnology, philology and psychology. There is no science without presuppositions, but is important for science to have the right ones.<sup>1</sup> Thus he suggests five conditions that are helpful in religious studies:

1. The first preliminary condition is a *strictly inductive method*.

Religion must never be forced into the constraint of a theological or philosophical system. It is necessary to be satiated with historical facts.<sup>2</sup>

2. One of the most important requirements of the inductive method is the *investigation of the sources*, that is to say, the texts and commentaries.

"Language and religion are very closely related. The Student of religion should be a student of language too."<sup>3</sup> Joachim Wach also says that the first necessary equipment for religious studies is the language, "the student of religions is never well enough equipped linguistically." It may not be necessary, but the chances of an adequate understanding are infinitely better where the interpreter is in a position to at least check on the translation of key terms.<sup>4</sup>

3. Religion should not only be studied in books, but in *living people*, both in individuals and in societies.

Those who wish to study religion, must attend religious services of all religions and confessions, and make himself familiar with both cult-like and puritanical devotion. What is required is not indifference, but rather an engagement of feeling, interest and participation.<sup>5</sup>

4. The fourth condition for a fruitful study of religion is a *universal point of view*.

The greatest danger, however, is that dogmatic view of religion that takes one's own religion as absolute, and regards that religion as a shining light, and all other ones as unrelieved darkness.<sup>6</sup> Ignorance, uncontrolled passion, and lack of direction are enemies of that state of mind which alone promises success in the venture of understanding.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Heiler, "The Scholarly Study of Religion," *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion*. vol. 1, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (The Hague: Mouton & Co. N. V., 1973) 471.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 472.

<sup>4</sup> Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) 11.

<sup>5</sup> Wach, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Heiler, 473.

<sup>7</sup> Wach, 13.

5. The fifth methodological requirement is *the phenomenological method*: one goes to the essence.

One should not remain on the outside, but penetrate everywhere to the heart of religious experience; from the fixed forms (ceremonial, dogmas), we must penetrate to immediate religious life.<sup>8</sup>

Above all there are three requirements for religious studies:

1. *Respect* for all real religions is essential.
2. The second requirement is *personal experience*.

One cannot be engaged in ethics without a moral sense, in history of art without any artistic experience, in philosophy without love of truth, in the study of religion without any religious feeling, in the broadest sense of the word.

3. The third requirement is *that one takes seriously a religious claim to the truth*: one cannot properly understand religion if one dismisses it as superstition, illusion, or as a scarecrow.

Any study of religion is, in the last analysis, theology, to the extent that it does not concern itself with psychological and historical phenomena only, but also with the experience of transcendental realities. Certainly, religion is a part of spiritual life and spiritual culture, but this spiritual life can be understood only on the basis of its final metaphysical source. This taking seriously a religious view of reality is, to a certain extent, a faith, but not a faith in the sense of a fixed theological or confessional dogma. The greatest scholars of religion, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Max Müller, Nathan Söderblom, have been men of faith, but of a universal faith, a faith transcendental in mankind.<sup>9</sup>

## Methodologies dealing with Buddhist Texts

### A Critical Attitude toward the Texts

Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, *no-self*, can be used as method for Buddhist studies itself. One should not stubbornly adhere to one's opinions and should remove pre-existing opinions in one's mind in order to seek the truth. Any dogmatic view towards the other religions or other schools should be avoided. The greatest danger is that religious dogmatism causes one to take one's own religion/school as absolute, regarding it as a shining light, and all other ones as unrelieved darkness.<sup>10</sup>

Usually, a Buddhist attitude toward the texts of one's tradition are quite different from that of a Buddhist scholar. For research, a critical attitude toward the texts is required and the different functions of a Buddhist and a Buddhist scholar should not be confused. The only kind of truth one can have as scholar is what is subject to discussion and verification in the open arena of the academy.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Heiler, 473.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Heiler, 473.

<sup>11</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, "Buddhist Hybrid English: Some notes on Philology and Hermeneutics for Buddhologists" *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies (JIABS)*, Vol. 4, No.2, 1981): 22.

## Linguistic Analysis

It is notable that distinguished Buddhist scholars like Stcherbatsky, Lamotte, Nagao etc., utilized the method of linguistic analysis to make great achievements in Buddhist studies. From their works, it is evident that a commonality among all of them is that they have mastered the Buddhist languages, i.e., Sanskrit, Pāli, Chinese and Tibetan. Prof. Nagao says "Buddhist studies in the future will have to be based upon a more critical and thorough-going philological analysis of the Buddhist texts that have been transmitted to us through several different traditions. In the present state of Buddhist studies, I feel that philology must precede philosophy or history, but what is even more important is the fact that the former must not nullify the latter."<sup>12</sup> Dr. Kawamura also says that these four languages are essential for a modern Buddhist scholar. Thus, in an investigation of Buddhist texts, it is essential to use the original languages, i.e., Sanskrit, Pāli, Tibetan and Chinese.

## Investigating Background (Contextualization) and Understanding the Intentions of the Text's Author

This is the phenomenological *method*: one goes to the essence. The superficial manifestations should be investigated only for the sake of the essence upon which they are based. One should not remain on the outside, but penetrate everywhere to its very heart.<sup>13</sup> For example, Nāgārjuna's philosophy of emptiness should be better understood if one knows the background which was the refutation of the Abhidhamikas whose views take the dharmas as reality and recognize the three phases (past, present and future) of existence of dharmas.

Scholars such as Tsukamoto Zenryu have brilliantly demonstrated that Chinese Buddhism can only be understood when one knows the background of Chinese history and culture. In the same way, Indian Buddhism has to be studied in relation to Indian culture, as one of the manifestations of Indian spirituality. This can be achieved only when scholars are actively engaged in the study of all aspects of Indian culture.

## Methodologies for Buddhist Text Translation

Translation of the Buddhist texts from classic languages such as Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan is essential for Buddhist studies. It is important to devise a method dealing with Buddhist text translation.

## A Brief History of the Translation of Buddhist Text in the West

Doboom Tulku in his introduction to a *Buddhist Translations*, mentioned three phases on the history of the translation of Buddhist texts to the West.<sup>14</sup>

the first phase covers the early years of the colonial period on the Indian subcontinent. During this time the translations of Buddhist texts into English from Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan were often done by missionaries or by persons who were

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<sup>12</sup> Gadjin Nagao, "Presidential Address by Professor Gadjin M. Nagao" *JIAS* Vol. 1 (1979, No.2): 82

<sup>13</sup> Heiler, 473.

<sup>14</sup> Doboom Tulku, "Introduction," *Buddhist Translations Problems and Perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995) 2-5.

deeply committed to and influenced by Christianity. Kern and Rhys Davis belong to this category.

The second phase covers roughly the first half of this century when the influence of Christianity and Christian values on western translators faded into the background. The categories and concepts of traditional western philosophy became dominant and most translators were vigorously influenced by Kant. The translators like Stcherbatsky and Conze were influenced by Kantian ideas.

The third phase is marked by "the introduction of still more models and conceptual schemes taken from the western intellectual and philosophical tradition." This phase can be said to run roughly from the middle of the twentieth century to the present. The ideas of Kant and Marx, as well as Berkeley, are largely abandoned. The new fashion has been to look to western psychology, as taught primarily by Freud and Jung, for conceptual schemes to be used in the translation and interpretation of Buddhist materials. There also has been a new tendency to adopt the concepts of linguistic relativism, particularly as propounded by Wittgenstein, for help in the work of translating Buddhist texts into English.

What these three phases have in common is the imposition of the Western conceptual scheme upon Buddhist material. Whether it was Christian values or those of traditional Western philosophy or those of modern movements in Western intellectual circles, all of them are marked by the prevalent use of a particularly western system of thought in the translation of Buddhist texts. It would not be wrong to say that all the translators working in these three periods have looked at the Buddhist texts through some Western spectacle of one color or another. The result has inevitably caused distortion, to a greater or lesser extent of the original genuine Buddhist message. For example, Buddhist philosophers like Asanga and Vasubandhu have a very different outlook from that of the traditional western idealism.<sup>15</sup>

A similar problem arose when Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese from Sanskrit at initial stage of Buddhism in China, where Taoist and to a lesser extent Confucian concepts, influenced the translation and interpretation of Buddhist materials. This situation lasted over three hundred years from the beginning of the introduction of Buddhism into China until the arrival of Kumārajīva in AD 401. The most celebrated translator in the Chinese history was Hsuan-tsang (AD 600-664). Because of his perfect knowledge of both the Sanskrit and Chinese languages and because his deep penetration into the vast ocean of Buddhist philosophy and literature "laid once and for all the reliable and authentic foundation for interpreting the Sanskrit scriptures into Chinese."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Summary comments, *Op. cit.* 5.

<sup>16</sup> W. Pachow, *Chinese Buddhism: Aspects of Interaction and Reinterpretation* (Washington, D. C., University Press of America, 1980 ) 106-7.

## New Method of Translation

Doboom Tulku's suggestion for a new translation is that it **allows Buddhist texts to speak in English but with an authentic Buddhist voice**. Sometimes such attempts led to overly literal English translations which become difficult for the average English reader not familiar with the original language to understand. The new approach to translation will speak with a genuine Buddhist voice, presented in a language and style comprehensible to the average educated reader.<sup>17</sup>

Joe Bransford Wilson also consents that "analysis (philological, historical, and philosophical) is needed in translation, but it should be relegated to the introduction, to the footnotes, or perhaps to annotations."<sup>18</sup>

Elizabeth Napper says that "the most useful translation is one that simply translates the text as accurately and as literally as possible,"<sup>19</sup> not to seek for the elegance of style, nor finding similar Western philosophical term, nor English idioms. She discusses translation of Buddhist texts from these perspectives.<sup>20</sup>

1. The criterion for what gets translated should not be elegance of style, but rather appropriateness as a vehicle to allow full understanding of this Buddhist tradition. A good translation requires making many decisions as to the meaning of the text. We need to translate Buddhist texts into accurate, readable English, in which decisions have been made as to the meaning of the text so that the translation is unambiguous. Such English may not be elegant, because the original language may not be elegant, but if it communicates the meaning of the text, it has performed its necessary function.
2. It is better to translate equivalents that simply translate the term rather than seeking to find a comparable term within the Western philosophical tradition. Because the Eastern and Western philosophical traditions are so different, seeking to use cognate terms often creates more confusion than clarity.
3. It is not proper to seek to shift Buddhist terminology into the current idiom of western culture. Because languages are in a constant state of change, too much concern with being current leads to translation that are quickly dated.

A new method suggested by Elizabeth Napper for Buddhist text translation was one in which one translates the text as accurately and as literally as possible, not to seek for the elegance of style, nor finding similar Western philosophical term, nor English idioms.

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<sup>17</sup> Doboom, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Bransford Wilson, "Problems and Methods in the Translation of Buddhist Texts from Tibetan," *Buddhist Translations Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Doboom Tulku (New Delhi, Manohar, 1995) 158.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Napper, "Styles and Principles of Translation," *Buddhist Translations Problems and Perspectives*, ed. Doboom Tulku (New Delhi, Manohar, 1995) 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.* 38-42.

## Conclusion

For research on Buddhist studies, any dogmatic view to the other religious or other schools should be avoided. Inductive method should be used where the first step is to investigate the sources by using the original language, i.e. Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese.

The method of translation of Buddhist texts should be as literal and accurate as possible, but should be clear, concise and readable English. Western philosophical analysis should not be applied in the translation of the text. It is not sufficient to translate a text and to explain briefly some technical terms. Both the introduction and the commentary of a translation ought to give full information on all matters relating to the text. Whenever possible, the original Sanskrit terms should be provided alone with the English translation. It is better to use the Sanskrit terms for some technical terms. Dr. Nagao suggests that the translation should be a form of fresh translation with extensive and detailed philological commentaries.

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