# Methodology of Buddhist Texts Translation

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Narrowing it down to the languages of Sanskrit and Chinese, it is clear that even these two languages are quite diverse. There is the influence of Prakrits, of different styles (*Abhidharma*, *kāvya*, *avadāna* and so forth), and different writing systems. In Chinese, one sees a colloquial language of different dynastic periods, changing translations of technical terms, poetry, etc. In order to sufficiently understand the texts, one needs the secondary literature, which is mainly in English and Japanese.

**Chinese Buddhist** texts are often subdivided in ancient translations (second half second century, ca. 400), old translations (ca. 400–ca. 550), and new translations (ca. 550–ca. 1,000). The first group translates from Prakrit, and its language is quite colloquial. Representative are: An Shigao and Sa ghadeva. The second group translates from Sanskrit. Representatives are: Kum raj va and Param rtha. The change of the underlying Indian language helps explain the change of the Chinese terminology. The third group "improves" the previous terminology. Its representative, Xuanxang, "improved" Param rtha's work. Ca. 1,000 new texts and translations were written in Kaifeng. These translations were mainly esoteric Buddhist texts. Some examples of changing terminology are: *Vedanā*: ancient "pain", old "experiencing," and *bhāvanā*: ancient "considering," old "cultivation." The new terms are the same as the old ones. How to translate into English? One should translate the meaning of the original Indian term, not the occasional Chinese interpretative term. In *abhidharma*, this becomes very clear. The use of "wrong" Chinese terms may inform us about the original Indian wording. E.g. *shi* means *anuśaya*, even though the meanings do not agree. *Shi* means "to cause," and *anuśaya* means "lies dormant." Few terms remain the same in all periods, e.g. *āsrava*, impurity. When the new translations appeared, the older terms and texts did not disappear. So we have a complicated vocabulary.

The best way to approach the study of Chinese Buddhist texts is to start the study of literary Chinese, of the language of the Confucian classics (especially Mengzi or Mencius). One should simultaneously study spoken Chinese. This method will allow the study of Chinese texts with minimal Indian links, e.g. Chan/Zen literature and Tiantai/Tendai texts. It will also allow the study of historical literature and biographies and prefaces.

Knowledge of **Sanskrit** is more important in East Asia than knowledge of Pali. The basic Indian language of Chinese old and new translations, which is the large majority, is Sanskrit. No Chinese text was translated from Pali. The importance of the Therav da tradition in South Asia, as well as social developments, have hindered the study of Sanskrit among Buddhist scholars in India. To acquire the necessary Sanskrit skills, one should start the study of this language before one's Chinese skills have developed. In order to make a translation, one needs advice concerning the use of dictionaries. Using the right ones saves hours a day.

There are the quite brief ones, both in Sanskrit and Chinese, but a large lexicon should be available. Also, depending on the subject, there are specified lexica, e.g. Chan/Zen, Mizong (Esoteric), Faxiang (Yog c ra) and Jingtu (Pure Land). For Sanskrit, there are specialized lexica too, e.g. E. Conze's dictionary of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. A Pali dictionary can often help a great deal, also to translate Sanskrit. Poetry has extra-linguistic criteria, such as *caesura* and *metrum*. Chinese poetry usually has verses of 4,5, or 7 characters. Such elements are a tremendous help in the case of *scriptio continua*. Furthermore, meaningfulness is often an important help. Often it is the case that one can translate a passage because one knows what its message should be. Especially in the case of a Chinese text, one does not read it to know the contents, but one should know the contents in order to be able to read it.

There is a vast amount of literature about "translating." I just add that if, e.g. the Chinese is quite colloquial and sometimes ambiguous, one's English translation should be like that too. One should never "correct" one's text. For example, the *Buddhacariva* in Chinese is quite colloquial. The Sanskrit text is very refined. So the English translation should reflect this.

A final remark: when Indians arrived in East Asia, they helped translate texts. They had to explain new Buddhist terminology. We read their explanations and understanding in the Chinese versions. This also helps us even today. Of course, out of respect, because of some taboo, some terms were not translated, e.g. *nirvāna*, *stūpa* and *caitya*, *prakyeka (Buddhda)*. But these terms were explained. Yet one not unimportant remark about making a translation is the fact that a translation has to make choices, less in Sanskrit than in Chinese. A considerable part of the Chinese Buddhist literature was composed in China, not translated. But the same "translation" Chinese was used, e.g. *yi...gu* (instrumental), a prefix rendered as a separate character, *zhong* or *yu* (locative case), etc. The best advice one can give is to work with an experienced translator for a while, and to see what he/she does. There is no substitute for this.