

Thus Might I Have Heard: A Lay Practitioner's Adventure in Translation*

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As a lay Buddhist practitioner for nearly thirty years, a fundamental part of my practice has been the ongoing journey in search of personal meaning and relevance in Buddhist teachings, rituals, and texts in general, and particularly from those of the Japanese Lay Buddhist organization to which I belong. At the beginning this was often a frustrating quest, complicated by my inability to speak Japanese—and by the character of the organization's few English texts themselves. Those were, at that time, mostly translations from source material in Japanese, including the organization's basic text for individual recitation and meditation practice—a compilation of excerpts from the *Threefold Lotus Sutra*. I experienced that the English translation of that text, even though it was fundamental to the practice, often produced puzzlement and confusion instead of generating insight and motivating reflection. Only after internalizing what was intended to be conveyed could I “recite” it, and even then it proved to be mostly an exercise in discipline. I still remember how badly I wanted to make an English version that, when recited, could be a catalyst toward the tranquility and illumination I sought to achieve through the practice.

Now I find myself being a member of a translation team charged with translation of elements of *The Threefold Lotus Sutra* into English from source texts in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese.

I once found a listing of the ideal components of a translation team that, supposedly, was a modern modification of the “System of the Nine Officials” of the Sung Dynasty. Based on that listing, my “job description” on the team, so to speak, might be a combination of the “Sentence-Compiler,” i.e., “*one whose English level is quite good, preferably having some experience with Buddhist studies or Buddhist text compilation, who is responsible for joining the translated words/phrases into meaningful sentences,*” and the “Literate-Polisher,” i.e., the “*one who is responsible for improving the phonetic and/or poetic flavor of the translation to make it more proper and/or attractive.*” Now,

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as a “sentence-compiler” and “literate-polisher,” facing the at once daunting and stimulating task of creating word images that foster understanding, motivate insight and reflection, and still fall easily upon the ear, I am often moved to reflect on the truth of the old axiom that one should be careful about one’s wishes, lest they be granted. And, in this case, that is because when you are just reading—and complaining—you are dealing with the end result and not the process. You get involved in the challenges of the process when you are trying to produce the end result; that is, trying to make a satisfying translation.

In this presentation, I would like to touch upon several issues and challenges that have arisen for me as a “sentence compiler” and “literate polisher” during that process of trying to produce satisfying translations, including such things as: 1) unintentional misleading use of words, 2) the capacity of the audience, which involves 3) its general perceptions, 4) inclusive language, 5) taking contemporary language quirks into consideration, 6) language rhythm, and 7) flexibility, which might itself be subtitled, “oh, my, what do we do with this one??”

In order that you can have an illustration of some of these situations in context, I’d like you to refer to the handout, and I’ll start at page 5.

On the bottom half of the page is an example of what I characterized as number 1), “unintentional misleading use of words.” This is a selection from the English version of the sutra that was used in my organization for recitation practice when I was first beginning to practice. The section is from the *Practice by Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue Sutra*, the third sutra in the collection known as the *Threefold Lotus Sutra*. At that time I don’t believe there were any translations into English of that sutra, or at least none widely available, so I’m assuming that this was translated by the organization from the Japanese text of the sutra, which you can see on the right. The outlined section is the part in question. The Japanese reads, “*dai san no sange to wa; shō hō o motte. Kuni o osame. Nin min o ja ō sezarū. Kore o dai san no sange o shu su to nazuku,*” and the corresponding English is, as you can see, “the third way of repentance is to reign over the land with the True Law, and not to oppress people unjustly. This is called the practice of the third repentance.”

The word combination that grabbed my attention, as well as that of other English-speaking members, way back then—and perhaps some of you just now—was the phrase, “not oppress people unjustly.” The question that came to mind was, “How do you justly oppress people?”

I don’t think you’re supposed to laugh when you recite a sutra. In my Christian background, I don’t remember reading any jokes in the Bible, at least in the *King James Version* (there might be some in the *Good News Version*, though. The idea of inadvertent laughter comes up again later in number 5, taking contemporary language quirks into

consideration). To our way of thinking, reflected in our use of language, the concept of “injustice” is already included within the word “oppression.” While this was done a long time ago, it seems to be a case of dictionary translation without a full understanding of language use in the target language. The meaning of the character “*ja*,” from a Japanese-English dictionary, is given as “wrong, evil, injustice, unjust.” I couldn’t find the character “*ō*” or the combination “*ja-ō*” in standard Japanese-English dictionaries, but in a Chinese-Buddhist Dictionary, the meaning given for the character “*ō*” is “oppression.” Hence, I gather, the resulting “oppress people unjustly.” Given that the selection is referring to making laws and governing one’s subjects, use of the word “limit” or “restrict” in place of “oppress” would seem to be appropriate for the context—and not nearly as jarring to the mind during recitation.

The second issue that has been part of my adventure has been taking (2) the “capacity of audience” into consideration. On page 46 of Burton Watson’s translation of the Lotus Sutra it reads: “*But you and the others already know how the buddhas, the teachers of the world, accord with what is appropriate in employing expedient means.*”¹ Page 51 of the Lotus Sutra translation by Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, reads: “*You have come to know with certainty the skillful means of the buddhas, the teachers of the world, which are expounded in accordance with people’s capacities.*”²

By way of personal speculation, if the Buddha spoke to the capacity of his hearers, perhaps it might be useful for me, if I am to improve myself as a “sentence compiler,” to examine any research that has looked closely at the sutras to see who comprised the audiences to whom the Buddha was speaking at the time of delivering a sutra, and the manner in which that discourse was delivered. For example, would an audience of bodhisattvas have been spoken to differently than an audience of laymen and laywomen? How did the audience affect the Buddha’s choice of words, if at all? Should the audience for the translation—for example, the members of a particular practice group—be taken into consideration? How many factors of this kind should a translator keep in mind?

Let me tell you a story:

Thus have I heard:

On one occasion the Buddha dwelt in Deer Park. A zebra went to Deer Park because he had heard that the Buddha would be there.

As he entered the park the zebra saw Ananda. Seeing Ananda, the zebra thought to himself, “Although I have a question that I wish to ask the Buddha, perhaps Ananda can answer it so that I need not trouble the World Honored One.” Thereupon he approached Ananda, offered greetings, and, after being welcomed, he said to Ananda: “Sir, I have a question that has

haunted me all of my days on earth, and perhaps you can ease my mind. Am I a white horse with black stripes, or a black horse with white stripes?"

Ananda said, "That is a question that only the Buddha can answer. You may seek him in the park."

So the zebra went off in search of the Buddha. When he found him, the zebra approached him, offered greetings, and, after being welcomed, he said to the Buddha, "World Honored One, I have a question that has haunted me all of my days on earth, and perhaps you can ease my mind. Please...I must know...am I a white horse with black stripes or a black horse with white stripes?"

The Buddha simply replied, "You are what you are."

The zebra thanked the Buddha and returned to see Ananda once more. Ananda asked, "Well, did the Great Sage straighten out your question for you?"

The zebra, looking puzzled, replied "No sir, He simply said, you are what you are."

Ananda smiled and said to the zebra, "Well, then, that answers it... you are a white horse with black stripes."

The zebra, surprised, asked Ananda, "How do you know that?"

"Because," said Ananda, "if you were a black horse with white stripes, the Great Sage would have said, 'You is what you is.'"

This story kind of shows the idea of speaking to the level of the hearer. When told to African Americans, or to people who are familiar with Ebonics—African American Vernacular English—it usually always evokes laughter (I varied the story somewhat for the benefit of this audience; in the original the players were, the zebra, St. Peter and God). Would the Buddha have answered as Ananda suggested if the horse had, indeed, been black? Or, another question, would the black horse have been insulted at that answer (which is sometimes the reaction in African Americans who hear the joke); or would he/she, guessing that the Buddha was exercising his sense of humor, taken the remark in a light-hearted manner and understood? How would the Buddha have answered if it had been a black horse that was not familiar with Ebonics? Would he have simply answered, “you are a black horse with white stripes”?

The meaning of what the Buddha said, “You are what you are,” was to be equated with “white horse with black stripes,” but the zebra wasn’t able to read between the lines. How far between the lines do we have to read? In other words, how much should a translator, or sentence-compiler, leave between the lines? My guess is that, were we all

zebras—you being what you are, and I being what I is—and if we were all attending a discourse by the Buddha, the images he would use through his skillful means would be ones that all of us zebras could grasp.

Another subject I would like to mention is inclusive language. I remember that many of the more contentious discussions we had in those early years of practice had to do with the short selection in our practice text from chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sutra*, *Avalokiteśvara*, “Regarder of the Voices of the World.” Maybe it was because we were all Californians, coming to Buddhist practice without having in-depth knowledge of it, but our mental image of *Avalokiteśvara*, or, by other names, *Kannon*, or *Kanzeon*, or *Kwan-Yin*, was that the bodhisattva is/was female. The “he” pronoun used for the bodhisattva in the English translation of the text was constantly challenged by almost every English speaking member of our group: male or female, or feminist, or anyone with a non-practitioner’s exposure to Buddhism through image, or art, etc. They wanted to know how they could recite or rely on something when they had to ignore/overcome the way it was written?? Japanese members, on the other hand, had no problem; their image was different. The Japanese and Chinese languages don’t use personal pronouns in the same way as English does; but translation into English without pronoun use is difficult. Some folks tried to make their own version of that selection, by trying to re-write the English without using pronouns at all. You can imagine how cumbersome those were to read, to say nothing of reciting them. Later on, trying to make it so that questions about sutra wording didn’t hinder practice to that great of an extent, we made a “culturally adapted” translation using the pronoun “she,” and there were never any more questions from American members of our group. We did get the occasional “How come *Kanzeon* is a ‘he’” from visiting Japanese members who spoke English, though.

As a sentence-compiler, I prefer to use inclusive language. Sometimes it takes some imagination, but it can be done; and personally, I think it should be.

Next I would like to talk a little about number 5 on my list, language quirks that a “sentence-compiler” may need to be aware of. Again, the reference (at the top of page 7 of the handout) is from the sutra that I used for practice 30 years ago. The Japanese in the box reads, “*moromoro no bosatsu no haha o nenzubeshi*,” and the corresponding English reads, as indicated, “And meditate on the Mother of Bodhisattvas.”

When I first began practice, the phrase “mother of bodhisattvas” attracted no special notice. But that was before Mr. Saddam Hussein made his contribution to contemporary language. Nowadays, the “mother of whatever” may not be considered as being such a good thing.

“The expression **mother of all...** is used to describe the greatest or most notable example of something. It's been used in a variety of contexts: ‘the mother of all political battles; the mother of all cover-ups; the mother of all monster movies.’ The London **Daily Mail** carried this headline in an article about the discovery of a vast tomb in Egypt: ‘Pharaoh's 50 Sons in the Mummy of All Tombs.’ The expression is also used in other languages: ‘It was, as the Italians called it, *la madre di tutte le tangenti*--the mother of all bribes’ (**The New Yorker**, 1994).

Hussein's specific use of the term is the source of its continued currency over the last 10 years. In September of 1990, Hussein was quoted as saying: ‘Prepare for war with the United States. Let everybody understand that this battle will become the mother of all battles.’ In January of 1991, he continued with his theme: ‘If there is war, the coming battle will be the mother of all battles. This battle has been ordained by God...And the great battle has been initiated, the mother of all battles, between the triumphant truth with the support of God and the evil pushed by Satan, which will be beaten eventually, God willing.’”³

As you can see, the phrase has gained international currency, but mostly in the form of “funny money.” Again, I don’t think we want to have a sutra that is used for serious practice be a source of laughter. Thus, a contemporary translator, acknowledging the baggage the phrase now carries, might be tempted to render the translation of the phrase as “that which engenders bodhisattvas,” just to avoid a smirk.

Originally, the sutras have an oral history. Originally, the speakers who told of their knowledge of the teachings acknowledged, “thus have I heard.” These sutra speakers might be likened to the *griot* of West African tradition. The *griot* is the member of the group who keeps its history, orally. He or she is a living book, the collector of the collective memories of the people, telling the tales that help the tribe know itself. In this way did the tellers of the stories of the Buddha’s teachings help the “Buddhist” tribe know itself. According to legend, great care was taken to hear all that was available to be heard, but in all cases, the initial written histories and compilations of Buddha’s teachings were recorded from spoken words retrieved from the libraries of people’s memories.

An invaluable aid to memory is rhythm, number 6 on my list, and I’m sure that the rhythm of whatever language the sutras were transmitted in was a great facilitating factor as far as understanding and remembering them was concerned. Thus, in a translation, I believe that the rhythm of the sentences should fall easily upon the ears, as is said in the description of the “literate-polisher,” i.e., the “one who is responsible for improving the phonetic and/or poetic flavor of the translation to make it more proper and/or attractive.”

Shakespeare was a master at using the rhythm of language – da dum, da dum, da

dum, da dum, da dum – iambic pentameter: “Me thinks the lady doth protest too much.” When I was a junior high school student, one of our class assignments was to learn a poem and recite it in front of the class. I chose Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride,” a rather long poem. And even over the long span of time since then, I am amazed that I can still easily recall the words of the opening lines, such was the power of its rhythm and rhyme...

Listen my children and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light—
One if by land, and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm."⁴

I think it most appropriate that Dr. Skropski, at the conclusion of the performance of the Homage to the Buddha, said: “It seems that when the Buddha’s teachings are sung, they are much easier to understand. Perhaps, starting tomorrow, you should sing your lectures.” Well, I’m not singing right now, but we do seem to understand better through our ears when language is crafted to that purpose. Such is the value of recitation, and I think the language of our translations must take that into the highest consideration.

In the days of the Buddha, his teachings and discourses first hit the ears of practitioners. It has long been said that, “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” (Please note that the language use there is intentionally specific.) In the days of the Buddha, the way to a practitioner’s mind was through his or her ears. Shouldn’t translations be reflective of that? Shouldn’t the words and wording be utilized and created with the understanding that meaning is being conveyed to the brain through the ears?

I’d like to ask for a show of hands in answer to this next question: How many of you remember specific lessons from your mother or father; things you learned from your parents years and years ago, and those lessons still come to mind from time to time, perhaps in response to a certain situation?

Show of hands again: How many of you received those lessons in writing???

Nowadays we rely very much on intellectual study, but I have come to believe that the words of a sutra should resound in the mind at the same time that they are collected by the eyes. At least that is the kind of wording I would like to create.

Translation is probably a never-ending process. Can you ever be satisfied? Absolutely sure? Probably not. As a translator, a “sentence-compiler,” the words I use can only reflect the depth of the understandings that we of the translation team reach. The words I use must try to include all of those understandings—all of the nuances that each of us might have taken from our discussions. If, upon further work, another, clearer or broader understanding is reached, it means that the first, second, or third, or whatever version has to be revised again to include the newest understanding. If we are learning, which I hope we are—because the teaching is not static, therefore neither should we be—then the process never ends. But that is a good thing. As we are translating sutras today, we are trying to make stuff said in 500BC, or thereabouts, relevant in 2005AD and beyond. Sometimes, when I’m debating with myself what word or phrase to use in a particular situation, I reflect on that fact; and then a word that often comes to mind is, “Wow!” Because, after all, and in the end, the translation that we as a team finally produce is, basically, “What we might have heard.”

Thank you very much.

1 *The Lotus Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, 1993.

2 *The Lotus Sutra: The White Lotus of the Marvelous Law*, translated by Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, Reiyukai, 1994

3 Words @ Random: The Maven’s Word of the Day.
www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=20000822

4 *Paul Revere’s Ride*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow