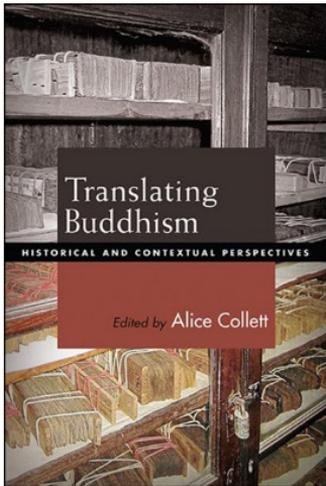


Alice Collett, ed., *Translating Buddhism: Historical and Contextual Perspectives*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021, 302 p., hardcover, US\$ 95, ISBN: 9781438482934

Reviewed by Sarah Shaw



The history of Buddhism is a history of translation. Unlike other major religions, with a single language used for sacred texts, Buddhism has always travelled, with texts translated into new languages, adapted, or transmitted in different forms; or it has blossomed from ancient languages into a rich variety of vernaculars, and sometimes back again. There is such a range of languages involved in Buddhist transmissions, from Pali, to Sanskrit, to Chinese, to Tibetan, to Japanese, to the local and regional, that there are only a handful of scholars who can even approach a working knowledge of the principal texts in the original, let alone the background factors involved in producing them in the first place. For any study of Buddhism as a whole, scholars always need other scholars and translators to help them.

A new volume of essays, edited by Alice Collett, gives us a welcome study of this field. It explores the detailed linguistic, philological, cultural, historical and regional factors that can influence the production of a good translation into English. At a time when increasing numbers of scholars and the reading public are so interested in Buddhist texts, this is a timely volume. All ten papers in the collection, first delivered at a conference in York St John University,

England, in 2016, illustrate how the work of translation necessarily includes complex and subtle considerations: a detailed knowledge of context, empathy and understanding, as well as a clear sense of hermeneutics and theoretical background, all need to be absorbed and allowed to help the translation of any given text work.

Collett's introduction gives a helpfully clear overview of the overarching themes of the book. Suggesting that this work is a step in what will be a long process in defining and setting parameters of a potentially new subdiscipline, the exploration of translation itself, she says that this collection is about finding appropriate questions to pose and debate:

The beating heart of the volume is, I hope, question after question about what the subdiscipline is, about how we define it, how we shape it, and how we want it to be constituted (p. 4).

As she further notes:

[...] contributors discuss the nature of Buddhist texts, how it is we came to have an understanding of what constitutes a text, how we might engage in translation practices that communicate something more than literal words, upholding other aspects of the function of the text for its intended audiences and explorations of hermeneutics, genre, and intertextuality (p. 15).

These are large considerations. Collett groups the contributions according to the central preoccupations addressed by the participants. Part I focuses on the nature of a particular text and the ways in which any theory of translation needs to be mediated by a perception of its genre and place in a larger corpus and context. Part II looks at translators, in particular their agendas, often historically overlaid by colonialist assumptions that animated many of the early translations into English. Part III explores specific examples of translation work, scrutinising how the products reflect and embody the aspirations of their translators: some of the preoccupations of earlier chapters are seen in these investigations. In practice, the problems addressed by all the contributors overlap considerably. The principles involved, however, are interestingly simple and apply to many of the areas under investigation: the extent to which context affects our reading of a text, the degree to which terms and words may be regarded as technical and the consequent effects

on translation decisions, the intention of the text itself, and ways in which Western assumptions can often affect how a particular work is translated and its text converted for a new audience. Much of the argumentation and detail of particular articles is necessarily complex and, inevitably, context specific. So, this review gives brief accounts of each essay; Collett's introduction gives excellent and helpful short summaries of the contents of each paper.

Collette Cox, the keynote speaker at the conference, sets some central themes (Chapter 1). As she says, "all translators recognize that the practice of translation is by no means straightforward" (p. 21). She proceeds to pose some challenging questions. To what extent is a text, with its own cultural history and purposes, a static artefact or product? How does this affect the work of a translator, who may be addressing very different concerns and audience assumptions? The "sediment of multiple activities" associated with "transferring" a text has led to much modern disagreement and argument: what are the interpretative implications of a "pure" philological approach? Is it even possible? Or should we pursue a critical philology that integrates and accommodates historical, literary and cultural perspectives? Addressing problems such as context, medium of transmission, ritual usage, liturgical purpose and apparent "authorial" intent, Cox pinpoints several areas where translation work can be affected by and itself affects interpretation. The discussion is dense; Cox's own considerable experience in translation work is immediately helpful. Working as she does with Gandhāran fragments, she notes that translation involves acute awareness to sensitivities, ancient and modern, alongside the cultural underpinnings of both. Indeed, those who composed the texts often expected such reconstructive analysis: while more recent manuscripts appear to be from a library of resources, recorded in entirety for archival purposes, many earlier fragments offer oral/written hybrids, such as ritual guidelines, or schemas for pedagogical purposes.

Cox's recent experience in working with very different forms of text ensures her analysis of translation is informed by direct experience. She explores Chinese commentators' debates on the same subject. Working in an atmosphere of the systematically consistent translation bureaux, discussions often revolved on policy decisions such as whether a translation should be "unhewn" (*zhi* 質), with simple, straightforward renderings of terms, or "refined" (*wen* 文), involving embellishment and care to literary style: Chinese commentators were acutely aware of the deficiencies inherent in the very

process of translation. She suggests that for early Chinese translations, early Indian Buddhist materials, and ritual texts designed for active oral recitation and usage, a flexible approach is needed. The text may have taken various forms at any given time, including changes that may have occurred for a new region. Multiple texts archived in several locations confound attempts to find a “pure” urtext, with variants requiring emendation to conform. The conclusion that a complex hybrid model characterises much Buddhist textual transmission is convincing. Translation then requires considerable adaptability and a willingness to accommodate variants and variation:

Such a historically sensitive approach entails a fundamental but quite simple shift in perspective: rather than assuming and looking for constancy, we expect and highlight difference [...]. For Buddhist materials in particular, this approach is necessary and indeed therapeutic since it undermines our “craving for stability” and negates the seductive appeal of an “essential” text, which the tradition teaches us cannot be found (p. 40).

Natalie Gummer’s essay (Chapter 2) starts from a different viewpoint: a text that itself is supposed to constitute, on recital, a living embodiment of the Buddha, *Suvarṇa(pra)bhāsottama* (*Sūtra of Utmost Golden Radiance*). How can the translator communicate this intention? Usefully addressing many concerns raised by Cox, Gummer notes that the multi-layered distinctions, such as hermeneutics, historiography and translation practices are mutually dependent. She provides plentiful examples: all excursions into analysis are accompanied by translated material, as she explains her attempts to preserve aspects of Sanskrit syntax crucial to the rhythmic cadence of the piece. Even spacing and line endings on the page can be key, highlighting pauses, and the effects of what even read silently can still be appreciated as one would an oral recitation (p. 66). She demonstrates that a text may, if presented with an alertness to the difficulties of a modern silent reader, still retain the magnificence of its stated intention: here, the recreation of the Buddha body, the food for those participating, each time it is heard.

Amy Paris Langenberg’s study (Chapter 3) of details in the *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya* of the Mahāsāṅghikalokottaravādins, a nuns’ “handbook”, examines hermeneutic and historiographical questions surrounding the translation of Vinaya texts. It stresses that we should not assume ancient texts are based

only on the preoccupations of a male elite: these stories offer vivid tableaux of the life of ancient nuns as well. Key issues addressed include what is legal, the extent to which Vinaya constituted a genuine guide or an ideal model, its accessibility to monastics at different times, and whether it offers a genuinely representative picture of life in ancient India. Philology, interpretation and speculation meet with fascinating conjecture about, for instance, the ancient use of tampons and expectations of correct female behaviour. Vinaya texts are curious: they depend upon the alarming misdeeds of often recurrently villainous or plainly anarchic figures, held as “bad” examples, in order to fulfil their purpose. Langenberg introduces the nun Sthūlanandā, for instance, an ancient admixture of Geoffrey Chaucer’s wife of Bath in *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* (c. 1405–1410) and Charles Dickens’ Sairey Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–1844). She is the transgressive figure constantly cited in the Vinayas as the embodiment of “How Not to Behave”. It is through her, however, that the exemplary balance of the “good” life for a nun is taught: the beauty of each rule is highlighted by the manifestation of its sometimes monstrous omission. As Langenberg explores the social landscape of the Vinaya *imaginaire* she hints, surely correctly, at some implicit humour in such depictions: the narrative vitality of Vinayas derives from their depiction. Primarily, however, Langenberg suggests that the Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya of the Mahāsāṅghikalokottaravādins exhibits the influence of some senior, mature nuns in some of its measured conclusions. This gives a satisfying and convincing explanation for the detail of female monastic life explored with such care in these texts: an active, female contribution to “authorship” is one further dynamic that complicates the discussion.

Part II opens with the scholarly detective work at which Oskar von Hinüber excels. His study (Chapter 4) focuses on the geographical, historical and regional aspects of philological work: the curious words that come up sometimes in Pali Suttas and Vinaya that date a piece of text or, very interestingly, locate it as stemming from a particular region. Here, philology gives clues to geography and date. To make his point, he discusses the word *giṇṇjaka*, a kind of *hapax legomenon* in the Pali Canon in the sense that it is only used in a particular sentence, although that is found in several places in the compound *giṇṇjakāvasathe*. It denotes a kind of house—“brick” could be a loose interpretation—which the Buddha visits on his last journey in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (D II 91). As Prof. von Hinüber points out, this word, suggestive of the kind of mud-

block building found in northeast India, would have been entirely alien in what is now Sri Lanka. The commentarial explanation must have come early, from India, suggesting a more ancient element in the commentaries than we sometimes suppose. He conjectures, plausibly, that there are others less easy to identify. Such geographical and regional linguistic analysis is used to elucidate some other passages which appear problematic and even ungrammatical. His conclusions, that some commentarial works emanating from Sri Lanka offers self-conscious improvements on older Indic *aṭṭhakathās*, is accompanied by an argument that Pali itself could have continued in southern India for several centuries. A few inscriptions there appear to use Pali forms: perhaps, he conjectures, there were Theriya monks living in southern India for some time. This is philology and translation perceived as historical tools which gives new insights into textual transmission.

Elizabeth Harris' empathetic account (Chapter 5) of often maligned early 19th-century Christian missionaries and translators of Pali, such as Robert Spence Hardy, Benjamin Clough and Daniel J. Gogerly, argues for their reinstatement for serious consideration. The earliness of their translation and dictionary work, before that of later classical Orientalists, their insistence that Buddhism was more than a rationalist study and their frequent capacity to break free from missionary agendas demonstrate the real respect and affection with which they regarded the Pali traditions. They visited the countries concerned, met Buddhists then uninfluenced by colonialist thought systems, and often give what appear now as fresh and interesting translations of terms. Spence Hardy's strong narrative interest and Clough's work with material objects reflect very modern concerns. As Harris argues, "These missionaries are worth revisiting" (p. 144).

In Chapter 6, Ligeia Lugli explores modern translations and provides a lexicographical perspective, on, for instance, the sometimes static definitions of Abhidharma. Impressively, she undertakes a brave analysis of the challenging Sanskrit term *saṃjñā*. Exploring six hundred occurrences, she poses questions about its difficulties. Does a term have to mean the same thing in a different context? The varieties of translation reveal the problems: in some places it appears to merge with "consciousness"; in others the term seems more like the cognitive and identificatory process with which it is more usually associated. Problems such as the imposition of Western psychological preconceptions about the nature of "apperception" and "cognition" are clearly involved.

There is a lexical gap: we do not have an exact counterpart in English. So, the reviewer liked the author's translation of the use of *saṃjñā* as "to perceive as": a practical conclusion to some probing analysis of context and applicability.

Part III, on "Words", develops this scrutiny of a single term further, with studies that each focus on one term. In Chapter 7, Alice Collett alights on the Sanskrit term *antevāsini*, the female "pupil" or novice, alongside its male counterpart *antevāsin*. After outlining some parameters of the idea of an *antevāsin/ī* in Vinaya literature, she studies scholarship that has explored the relationship between texts and epigraphy, and questions on the basis of the material evidence whether early communities really had comprehensive knowledge of the Vinaya. Epigraphic evidence, she argues, sometimes challenges the conception of Vinaya as a reflection of social reality: were Sanghas always separated on gender lines? Anomalies in inscriptional evidence create problems for the notion of the *antevāsini*. Some early inscriptions suggest a fluid relationship in what actually happened in transmitting lineages: ancient Amarāvati records a "male-female-female transmission" (p. 187). The Pali *pātimokkha* does not advise against male teachers and female pupils; other Vinaya literature, however, suggests a strict separation of sexes. Are Vinayas prescriptive or descriptive? For the Vinayas cannot have given the model for the teacher-student relationship here: they suggest the *antevāsinin/ī* helping their teacher with bathing and getting dressed, which is hardly realistic across sexes. She concludes that this "fluid, dynamic technical term" (p. 190), like so many others, cannot be static: acceptable mores would differ according to context, and it could well have simply been variously applied.

Chris V. Jones in Chapter 8 shows how unconscious assumptions have shaped our perception of how one word should be translated. The word *tīrthika* in Sanskrit, or otherwise *tīrthya*, and with it the closely related *tīrthakara*, cognate with the Pali *titthiya* (also *titthakara*), is, he argues, too easy to overlay with Western assumptions. It has routinely been translated as "heretic". But the word "heretic" itself has all kinds of associations with defection and disloyalty derived from Christian usage. These are not necessarily present in the original Greek. Jones suggests the Pali/Sanskrit term's usage, while pejorative, was more akin to these Greek roots, in *haíresis* (αἵρεσις), a term derived from the word for "to choose", applied to someone who follows a path with commitments and objectives that are different from one's own. This helpful study shows, as Jones points out, that:

As is so often the case with the reconstruction of Indian religious history, our available literature provides only small and opaque windows onto what people did or thought in the environments of our authors (p. 220).

Dhivan Thomas Jones (Chapter 9) makes a study of the grammatical and syntactical features of an even more difficult Pali term, *paṭiccasamuppāda*. His linguistic investigation and a critical analysis of secondary literature show that a nuanced appreciation of such philological concerns is often essential, particularly so, of course, in this case, involving core Buddhist doctrine. By exploring the minutiae of the way the term compresses the syntax of a longer sentence into a syntactical compound, as well as assessing interpretations both commentarial and modern, Jones brings us finally to a simple conclusion: he argues that the core metaphor is one of growth, and the dependency that arises as a consequence of that. According to him, “Arising dependent on a causal basis” offers the best literal translation of *paṭiccasamuppāda*. Given, as he argues, that the Indic cyclical view of time problematises words such as “cause”, so often understood through the linear approach of Western philosophy, he argues for a metaphor suggestive rather of this natural vegetative process:

The translation “dependent arising” best suggests the naturalistic concept of causation to which the term *paṭicca-samuppāda* refers, in its own cultural context, as is illustrated through comparisons to organic growth (p. 257).

In Chapter 10, Aruna Gamage makes detailed study of the term *desanāsīsa* as it is found in Pali commentaries. The essay explores the implications of “literalness”: *desanāsīsa* is a widespread classificatory term in Buddhaghosa’s works but appears to be used in all kinds of ways. Gamage examines a number of contexts and suggests that a single translation is not always helpful in rendering the term. It is just employed in so many ways: sometimes to denote two parts of a whole, sometimes to suggest two opposing qualities, and sometimes to introduce metonymy, with a kind of substitution rather than variation. At the end, we are directed to Margaret Cone’s choice: “the indication of a category” or, perhaps best of all, “the headword in a discourse”.¹

¹ Margaret Cone, *A Dictionary of Pāli: Part 2, g-n*. Bristol: Pali Text Society, 2010, *sub voce*.

Overall, throughout this book there is a common thread: how a translation can best express the intent, style, cultural background and preoccupations of those who created the texts, who were often themselves alert to the possibility of diverse interpretations and applications in new settings. Texts grow over extended periods, as Hinüber points out: they get applied in different settings, particularly if liturgically or ritually based, as Cox reminds us. They often have multifarious forms, often emerging from hybrid oral/contexts, in, for instance, liturgical templates, making the search for ultimate “purity” challenging at best. As this volume attests, authors frequently change their own text, as Śāntideva (fl. late 7th to mid-8th century CE) apparently did. Precision and close attention to historical context, artefacts, inscriptions, however faulty such assessments may be, also compound difficulties. Despite or even because of such complex issues, the richly various contributions in this volume demonstrate that the depth of craft and skill involved in translation work is considerable.

One overriding theme is that each text poses its own idiosyncrasies and problems, requiring often subtle knowledge and the ability to discern what is needed. We see this from Cox’s analysis of the difficulties in different kinds of Gandhāran manuscripts, each of which presents its own requirements and needs, and in, for instance, the interpretations of Vinaya texts by Collett and Langenberg, where all kinds of assumptions may be involved in the translation of some key terms. D.T. Jones’ essay shows how highly technical linguistic analysis can reveal the need for a translation that denotes, however, the simple and even familiar. At the point of delivery, as Gummer shows, even presentation on a page can have an effect on the reader. It should be noted, however, that the enormous task of translation is rarely acknowledged and appreciated. No one gets a tenured position at a university on the basis of translating Buddhist texts; such work does not count for points in scholarly assessments. Collett summarises the situation with understatement: “Publications that are wholly translations, and not discursive volumes, have not always curried favor in some academic circles” (p. 2).

As a translator of Pali Jātakas myself, the most pressing problems I encounter are sometimes more mundane than many addressed here. As with other issues explored in this work, however, they too reflect complex cultural problems. Many, importantly, concern the conversion of a largely oral literature into a literary product that is “read”, alone. Words used constantly in Jātakas, which worked when they were heard, just look banal when

clustered on a printed page. For instance, endless variations on *avoca* (he/she said), which can occur twenty times on one page, are sometimes needed. It becomes the pulse animating a particularly dramatic exchange. How can one translate it? He/she replied, said, stated, responded: resourcefulness founders in an attempt to break a repetition that looks deadly dull in a story held in one's hands, in a book or on Kindle. Should you use weighted words like "expostulated", "exclaimed", "pleaded", "argued", and even "wept", the means whereby stories in the English language usually give emotional variation to "he/she/they said" interchanges? It is the translator's decision, dependent on the content of what is "said". Words like *avoca* are border plants, that show themselves against a relief of background foliage and shrubs. In Indic texts, where indirect speech is so often framed in direct form, the talking conveys the emotion, in the shrubs themselves. In Anglophone stories, it is often in the ways of expressing "he/she said", around the edges of the bed, that we find the emotional variation and colour. Conversely, when you get to the Abhidhamma, a quite different problem emerges. All literary and human instincts make one want to have different translations for some terms, as the discussion on *saṃjñā* in the Abhidharma above has shown. We can see this in another Pali term: *kusala*. It means variously "healthy, skilful, wholesome, and good". One needs the many possibilities to get the right sense for a particular context. But it is the intricate variations in the lists and the patterns permutating according to simple templates which are of the essence in Abhidhamma. Consistency is essential; the most unhelpful and confusing thing a translator can do is to spoil all that by changing translations for words and terms halfway through! These two examples, from opposite extremes of the spectrum of terminological consistency, vindicate the far more scholarly research of the contributors to this volume on many axes: not too many rules can be applied to good translation work other than flexibility and a willingness to follow the direction of the text. It can be put even more simply. One needs to listen and empathise with the text. On many occasions, it will tell you what it needs.

For those working on Buddhist texts, the signposts and questions posed in this book are excellent. They suggest how we can interrogate problems such as the culture, background and mores of the texts we are "translating" in its modern literal sense—and then observe the often deeply embedded assumptions that we may bring to such an exercise. Through closely analysed

examples, new insights, often of an apparently simple kind, emerge through each essay, as well as specific understanding of the topic at hand. In the end, *Translating Buddhism* is primarily a book about translation in a much larger sense than our modern usage allows (Latin *transfero*: to translate, bring across). It describes the process of bringing across, or transferring, the words of the texts into a modern world, and thus finding out how sometimes just one word, or one gloss on a manuscript page, may reveal so much. Translators of Buddhism do something more than excavate and explain: they are not interpreting archaeological artefacts. They must replant a text in a new soil, as with an imported herb, flower, shrub, or tree, so that it survives as a living entity and can be appreciated by new people in new soils and settings. As with gardening, you cannot “bring across” these plants unless you love them.

Collett’s volume shows the various crafts and disciplines that can be brought to bear on this necessarily painstaking work. It vindicates translation as a study, worthy of academic respect and value. After all, most of those who are Anglophone by upbringing first read or hear Buddhist texts in translation; for the many languages we do not know, we all continue to depend on translations. Under Collett’s careful curatorship, all the essays in this impressive collection, with their keen awareness of problems raised by others participating in the same volume, also show how a group of scholars can listen to others, working on texts apparently very different from their own, and collectively explore some of the principles involved. This book should help further the status of translation: it will also, one hopes, encourage more of such interchange.