EDITORIAL
The Buddha's Language Saga Continues

Aleix Ruiz-Falqués

After a year that has been particularly challenging, the *JOCBS* is back with a fresh batch of articles. In this issue, five of the six pieces deal with Pali language in some way or another. Specifically, two authors, **Levman** and **Karpik**, bring up new contributions to the old and fascinating saga on the language of the Buddha: "Did the Buddha speak Pali or an eastern dialect that is virtually lost in the textual record?" Both authors have written on this topic before, even in this very journal (Vols. 16 and 17). The reader is therefore kindly advised to refer to previous publications if he or she wishes to better understand the context of this scholarly debate, one that goes back to early scholarship on Pali in Europe. In the first published Pali grammar written in English—Benjamin Clough's *Compendious Pali Grammar* (Colombo, 1824)—we read:

> It has been a contested point whether the Pali of Sansgrit [sic] be the more ancient language of India; it is certain, that Pali was the popular dialect of the native country of Buddho, namely Magadha, before the powerful sect founded by him, was expelled from the continent of India, an event prior to the Christ Æra. (Clough 1824: iii)

This summarises the traditional understanding according to which the Buddha spoke *māgadhī*, the language of Magadha. Now the problem is what exactly *māgadhī* refers to, what is the language behind this label. Surely, we call any form of English "English", whether it is from the 16th century, the 19th, or 21st; whether it is from "Los Angeles" or "Dakota", "Tasmania" or "Hawai'i" (note that all these proper nouns, despite non-English origin, would also be

considered in the English lexicon). We know that English is not French despite the fact that an erudite scholar could postulate an original French redaction of classical English works, consider this fragment from Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* (lines 859–862):

> *Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,*
> *Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;*
> *Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,*
> *And in his tyme swich a conquerour* [1]

Indeed, the words *stories, duc, Atthenes, governour* and *conquerour* are most probably Gallicisms—they are from French. But all languages have borrowed words. Similarly, Burmese, Sinhalese and Thai use very many Sanskrit and Pali words, especially in literary texts. To some extent, then, we know that a certain text in a certain language may present words that are borrowed from another language, but that does not mean this text is a translation. This is quite obvious.

The problem is that the debate around Pali is not so simple, because we enter the realm of closely related dialects rather than clearly distinct languages. In the case of Pali (or any other early Buddhist texts in Indic languages, such as Gandhari and Buddhist Sanskrit), the issues at stake are, on the one hand, the fact that the *māgadhī* described by grammarians does not correlate to our Pali, and on the other hand that our Pali is more similar to epigraphic texts from western India, rather than texts from eastern India, closer to Magadha. There is ample consensus, then, that whatever *māgadhī* means in Pali commentaries and grammatical texts, this is not the *māgadhī* that we know from other sources. It could simply be a symbolic name for the language that we, conventionally, call Pali. It could be a plain misnomer too. Expanding on a line of thought that, to my knowledge, was first propounded by R. O. Franke in his pioneering (and mostly forgotten) essay *Pali und Sanskrit* (1902), Stefan Karpik shows that the premise for the previous argument, namely that Pali corresponds to "western" dialects, is false. We possess a large corpus of inscriptions in a sort of Middle Indic *koiné* that Franke called "*gesamtes Pali*" ("common Pali"), as opposed to the literary Pali of the Buddhist canon in Sri Lanka. These inscriptions are not from the west and they are not necessarily

[1] https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/knights-tale-0

Buddhist. It is true that they may have a later date than the date given to the composition of the earliest Pali texts. But it is quite plausible, as Karpik posits, that these two linguistic mediums of expression, similar as they are, correspond to different stages of the same language. This language is not the *māgadhī* from the kingdom of Magadha, but perhaps a dialect originally from central and western India (from Kosala westwards up to Avanti).

Now Levman's argument works in quite a different direction, taking as a point of departure the famous work by Heinrich Lüders, *Beobachtungen über die Sprache des buddhistischen Urkanons* (Berlin, 1954), published posthumously under the editorship of E. Waldschmidt. In short, the thesis here is that the Pali texts that we have are not the "original canon" ("*Ur-Kanon*"), but a sort of recast into a western Middle Indic dialect. It is my opinion that Levman's important research, which includes groundbreaking work on non-Indo-Aryan onomastica, is partly compatible with the Franke/Karpik claim. But the gist of Levman's article is precisely in those parts of the argument that are not aligned with Karpik's. This includes a detailed description, with examples, of how certain words present problematic forms that can be explained and understood only as backformations, that is to say, a sort of translation—sometimes "wrong" translations—from an earlier dialect that was not always properly understood. This is a point that Karpik does not address, but perhaps, if the saga continues, he will in a future issue of the journal.

Other articles in this issue represent the noble efforts in exploring the rich treasures of medieval Pali literature, whether it is by editing and translating lesser known texts, as the new installment of the late **Peter Masefield**'s work on medieval Pali narratives; or by exposing the importance of literary analysis in the language of the commentarial texts, which, as **Gamage** shows us, abound in hermeneutical discussions that ultimately determine the correct understanding of a word or a line, and constitute an indispensable aid to grammar. In line with these articles, **Brewster's** contribution sheds light on classical controversies in the Madhyamaka school. Brewster's analysis offers us a key to contextualise and better understand philosophical debates on Emptiness. Finally, a more contemporary and practice-oriented contribution, the one by **Tempone-Wiltshire** and **Dowie**, explores the always complicated relationship between mindfulness and contemporary science. This is a subject that is often treated from a purely theoretical standpoint, but here we have an instance of a more practical approach based on the experience of psychological practice.

I would like to conclude this editorial by stating that I'm pleased to have been able to accept the editorial role and to assist in steering a course towards a positive future for the journal. I am very grateful to the editorial team, including the former editor Alexander Wynne, who have worked especially hard to bring this volume to publication. This year we have chosen not to publish any reviews, but look forward to doing so in future volumes. Information about submissions, with new revised guidelines, will be available from the website as of 2024.