

Translating the Buddha

The Sutta Nipata is one of the earliest texts of the Pali cannon, coming from the same period as the Dhammapada, before the monastic tradition was very strong. It is a verse cycle created by ascetics as they practised and often refers to “the wise one”, rather than solely to monks or nuns. Book IV is the oldest part of the sutta and it is this part that is translated in The Way Things Really Are.

The work of translation began nearly twenty years ago. Primoz Pecenko mentioned casually that he thought Book IV of the Sutta was one of the most dynamic and interesting texts of the early Theravada. What a pity, he said, that there were no good translations. At that time the only translations were by scholar monks who were not practitioners and who had therefore not made informed translations of some of the references to meditation experience.

Primoz and his wife, Tamara Ditrich, were both Pali scholars. I had begun publishing poetry and literary prose. We all meditated in the tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw. Primoz and Tamara had spent many years in retreat in Sri Lanka and Burma. Tamara had already completed several translations of Buddhist texts into her native Slovene and was the main translator from Pali to literal English for this project. Primoz had lived in Panditarama, Rangoon, for several years before he and Tamara married. I had begun spending two or three months every year in retreat. Together we had the skills necessary to translate this text.

Every Sunday night we met and discussed the text of a poem. Primoz and Tamara presented me with a literal translation. For each Pali word they listed all the possible translations. We tried out different subtle permutations of meaning together and then I went off with my notes to write a free verse version.

The first revelation I had was during the first night's discussion. I had no knowledge of Pali. I had studied other languages and understood that each language embodies the universe in a different way, so much so that at times the universe embodied in one language can seem to be a different universe to that described in another language. So it was with Pali. A simple English statement like, I am hot, becomes in Pali, something like, The sensation of heat is arising in me. That is, there is no solid sense of a self in charge of experience! The emphasis is on the heat not on the speaker. There's the experience of heat and the knowing of the heat. It's an expression of anatta.

The understanding of anatta, one of the three characteristics of existence (along with anicca and dukkha) is embodied in the language. And if it's in the language, then it's in the conceptual framework inhabited by the speakers of that language. Imagine coming to meditation with such a deep understanding of the nature of existence. I began to see why many teachers say that Asian meditators find practice much easier than Westerners. We will surely come to see anatta as we practise – in fact it's inevitable that we will because it is a characteristic of the nature of existence – but we must practise in order to see it.

There are many allusions to the kind of freedom that comes with this understanding in the course of the poems in The Way Things Really Are. This one comes from "Before the Body's Dissolution":

"You swim
oceans of equanimity
are always
mindful
never assess yourself
as superior
equal
or inferior.
You have no haughtiness
at all.

The original verses are written in a highly structured rhythmical pattern and with rhyme. Good rhyming is achieved with difficulty and rarely sounds natural in today's English. It doesn't fit easily with the kind of relaxed speech patterns we use in Australia. When I began work I read all the previous translations to see what other people had done – they had often attempted to use a rhyming pattern and this sounded laboured and ungainly to my ear. I wanted to write something that felt contemporary, as though the Buddha – a lot of the poems are presented as the words of the Buddha – was a teacher you might have met at the beach or out in the bush. So I ended up with language like this:

Look! You're self
obsessed,
flapping about like a fish
in a drying creek.

(from "The Cave")

and from another poem called "How Opinion and Thought Contaminate the Mind":

The wise
see your failings
if you blow
your own trumpet
skite
about your virtue
and awareness

but they acknowledge
your virtue
if you're calm
don't brag
are selfless
and unworldly.

(I loved using a bit of Australian slang like "skite" in the middle of direction about how to behave).

When it's working, our practice is as much part of our daily life as it is something we do on our cushions and it seemed that the best way to convey this was by using Australian colloquial language.

The second change I made was in the gender of the person often referred to as "the wise one". All the other translations referred to the wise one as a male. Half the wise ones in our translation are women, half men.

Anyone who's free
denies there's liberation
by another
or by what she sees
and hears
by rules of morality
rites and rituals
or through what
she thinks.
Neither good
nor evil
affect her.
She's given up
the grasping self.
Her action now
is neither good
nor bad.

From " Purity of Heart".

One of the main subjects addressed in the poems is the role of attachment, particularly desire, in keeping us tied to an unsatisfying existence. From "On Desire":

No matter what you long for:

a house, land, livestock, gold,
serfs, servants, slaves,
men, women, family,
(innocent things of themselves)
the longing overwhelms you
till troubles bear down
and suffering follows
like water rushing into
a leaky boat.

But if you're mindful
you evade desire
as easily as side-
stepping a snake. You're free
of the world's sticky
traps.

Be mindful
abandon desire
bale out the boat
& reach the further shore.

"The further shore" is a traditional metaphor for enlightenment. The speaker in
"On Violence" explains where exactly the shore lies and why we find it difficult to
cross over to it:

I call greed
the great river
and desire
its current.
Desire
makes the river run.
Our sense pleasures
bog us down in mud,
make it hard
to cross over.

In one of the liveliest poems, "The Cave", the speaker leaves us in no doubt
about the consequences of letting desire run our lives:

You're greedy
intent on desire
infatuated by desire
mean.

You're on the wrong track
heading for a bad time.
You wail, "What'll happen to me
when I die?"

I see you trembling
with desire
for a different state
of mind,
a sad wretch
muttering in the mouth
of death.

Modern teachers tend to be much easier on us but this directness, often
combined with a sense of urgency, often appears in the verse cycle. In "Old Age"
we're told:

Life's so short
you'll die
before you turn
a hundred.
(Even if you don't
old age'll get you
in the end).

When what you cherish
fades away
you grieve
but nothing's
permanent.
You know
owning things
is meaningless
so don't get stuck
in your comfortable
house.

Everything you think
is yours
stays here
when you die.
Be wise:
devote yourself
to truth
forget about
owning things.

And again in "The First Discourse on Disputes":

When you get stuck
in your own beliefs
& argue with others
you're likely to say,
"If you agree with me
you know the truth
& if you don't
you're just not
realised!"

The debate's
a slanging match.
"You're stupid!"
"Well, you're wrong!"
Everyone says
they're right
How can you know
who is?

if you don't agree
with someone else
you're a fool
worthless
an ox.
All fools
are daft
all of them
stuck
in their own beliefs.

The kind of situation described in this poem arises nowadays as we are offered a variety of spiritual practices. I have had to learn to hold my tongue with friends in different traditions, who, no doubt with the best motives, want to convince me of the superiority of their style of practice. Practical approaches to this situation are given in the rest of the poem. (Information on how to access the complete poems is given at the end of the article).

The author (or authors – the text has no clear creator but comes from the time of oral transmission, so it's probably the work of several people) emphasises

the importance of not clinging to opinions in several of the poems. In "Pasura, the Debater" we read:

Different people settle
for different versions
of the truth. You say
your way's
best.
You claim: this is
the way to purity
and only this.

You all gather
to discuss the truth
each one believing
the other's
got it wrong.
You base your claims
on what others
tell you.
You quarrel
wanting praise
saying that you
know best.

You're arguing
at a gathering
hoping for praise
fearing the failure
which leaves you
downcast
furious at their jibes.
How can you
get them?

The most dramatic poem is one from which I've already quoted, "On Violence".

The response to violence
is fear. I'll tell you
about the dismay I felt
when I saw people
hurting each other.

They struggled like fish

fighting
in a drying creek
and I was scared.

The world's
not stable,
everything's
in flux.
I wanted a place
to be safe
from change
but there was
nowhere.

In the end I was
disgusted
by their hostility.
That's when I saw
the barb
worked deep
into the tissue
of their hearts.

When the barb
pierces someone's heart
she runs first one way
then another;
when the barb's
drawn out
she neither runs
confused
nor falls down
weary.

The barb of course is attachment and the poem goes on to outline the wise way to respond and find the safe place within us.

Other poems in the verse cycle outline teachings like dependant origination. (They are less satisfying to read in the kind of short quotation I've included here).

"The Fast Way to Freedom" begins with the questions we all ask. The "great sage" at the beginning is the Buddha.

Great sage!

Close kinsman of the sun!
Teach me about
peace and non attachment.
How can a monk
see enough
to grow calm?
Give up grasping hold
of worldly things?

The great sage
Buddha
said, "Be wise. Side-
step the traps
that trick you
into believing
that 'you are'.
It's a delusion.
Whatever deep desires
you may have
practise for their
extinction.
Be mindful
all the time.

Later in the poem comes the answer we all want:

"Find peace within.
Don't look for it
elsewhere.
Someone who's calm
takes nothing
casts nothing
aside.

"Be as still
as the centre
of the ocean.

May we all find the stillness at the centre of the ocean.

The complete translation is available as a free download from [Buddhanet](http://Buddhanet.net).

I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of Primož Pecenko and
Silvana del Sole.