

BUDDHA, BUDDHISM AND LANGUAGE

Ven P. Gnanarama

The purpose of this article is to explore the Buddhist view on language according to the way the Buddha had put it into use as a medium of communication, and the Buddha's attitude to it as a pragmatic means of communicating with others. While stressing the ethical aspect of it, the Buddha has shown its importance as an effective medium of sustaining healthy social relations as well as disseminating the teaching. Since Buddhism is unequivocal about the uses and abuses of language, the references to language in the Pali canon are many and varied.

A language is a specialized sound signaling system, most probably genetically programmed to develop in humans. It is constituted of nouns, verbs and sentences. It is said that unlike the animals' communication systems, it is learned and not inborn. As a tool of communication it can be used to convey one's thoughts, to talk about itself, objects or events or situations of past, present and future. Evidently, for the purpose of communication, humans have other means as well. Conscious or unconscious bodily movement used to convey a feeling is called **Body Language**. There is another system of communicating with and among the deaf consisting of facial and manual gestures and signs called **Sign Language**. Here we are concerned only about the language proper as used by the Buddha as well as in Buddhism.

Is Māgadhī the primeval Language?

The Buddha's teaching found in the Pali canon is the earliest record of the teaching available to us. According to Theravada tradition, Pali language is said to be Māgadhī or Suddhamāgadhī, the language used by the Buddha. The *Rūpasiddhi*, the Pali grammar of the 13th century asserts that this particular language is the primeval language, which the primitive people used for their communication. Besides, it is also said that brahmins, those who have not heard any other language and the Buddhas use this language. When the Buddha preaches the supreme doctrine by the medium of this primeval language all are able to understand it as their own language.¹ Since this attempt to ascribe originality to Pali is untenable linguistically as well as historically, anybody

who has any knowledge of historical linguistics does not take this fanciful idea seriously.

Firstly, Pali shows a tendency towards simplification of the earlier Vedic language called Ancient Indo-Aryan. In Pali, complexities of original nominal declension and verbal conjugations have been made simple. This tendency is attested further in other later Middle Indo-Aryan Prakrits as well.

Secondly, since there are no written records, nobody knows the language of the primitive people for certain. When we go through the Pali canon, it becomes quite clear that the Buddha did not want to ascribe sacredness to any language or to confine his teaching to a particular class or caste of people as brahmins did with regard to Sanskrit and their religious teaching.

Thirdly, Pali has the characteristics of a mixed language with elements from the Eastern and the Western dialects. Various double forms, use of several forms of the same word and the diverse nature of the representation of conjunct consonants are some of the peculiarities of Pali.

Fourthly, Pali betrays an interim period of the evolution of Indo-Aryan languages in India attesting its relationship with Ancient Indo-Aryan or Vedic rather than with Sanskrit.

The complex character of the language exhibiting diverse dialectal elements led the early Indologists to locate the home of Pali in different geographical locations in India. However Geiger sticking on to the old view that Pali is Magadhi called it a *kunstsprache*, a compromise of various dialects, a *lingua franca*,² a language used as a common language between speakers whose native language is different. It is a mixed language, just as the language mixed with Italian, French, Greek and Arabic etc. and used in Mediterranean ports.

As revealed from the first mission statement addressed to the first sixty Arahants, the Buddha wanted to propagate and popularize his message among all segments of Indian society of his time. Certainly, he did not want to confine his teaching to a selected few or elites alone. No linguistic prejudice is shown in disseminating the teaching. This is clearly depicted in the discourses dealing with his life, teaching and career.

Therefore, he must have selected a popular dialect or dialects for his preaching. Since the Buddha's attitude to language was practical and utilitarian, he focused on the feasibility and effectiveness of the selected medium of expression to convey his message across. Concerning the communicative norms that results in communicative competence, he denounced the abuses of language by lying, backbiting, harsh speech and gossiping. The positive aspects and

benefits of speaking truth and abstaining from backbiting, harsh speech and gossiping are detailed in several discourses in the canon.

According to the Buddha, one has to avoid the abuses of language whatever the language one uses. One is to be concerned about its **quality** related to truthfulness, **quantity** confining to right and precise information, **relevance** by focusing on appropriateness of what is conveyed and the **manner** dealing with the orderly way of presentation.

The Medium is to be Changed According to the Audience

In order to make the communication effective, the Buddha advised the monks to follow a non-conflicting attitude toward the language. The entire *Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta* is a dissertation on the proper use of language for efficient and effective communication and also to avoid conflicts that arise due to improper use of language. It is interesting to note that the discourse outlines how the doctrinal issues are to be disseminated in impersonal reference without hurting the feelings of the listener. One should neither extol nor disparage the views of others but should teach only the *Dhamma* knowing how to define and explain it without prejudice. The discourse illustrates the issue further:

“One should not utter covert speech or overt sharp speech. One should speak unhurriedly, not hurriedly. One should not insist on provincial language and one should not override common parlance.”

Stressing the fact that either covert speech or overt sharp speech to be true, correct, and beneficial it should be uttered knowing the right time to do so. The discourse continues to explain the disadvantages of speaking hurriedly:

“Here, monks, when one speaks hurriedly, one’s body grows tired and mind becomes excited, voice is strained and throat becomes hoarse. The speech of one who speaks hurriedly is indistinct and hard to understand.”

Explaining the medium to be used for effective communication, the Buddha states categorically that one should not cling on to provincial usage and go beyond the recognized parlance. The relevant passage of the discourse runs thus:

“It was said (at the beginning) that one should not be attached to the provincial dialects (janapada nirutti) one should not deviate from recognized parlance (sāmaññaṃ). Why was this said? Now monks, what is attachment to the provincial dialect and what is deviation from recognized parlance? Here monks, in certain provinces they call the same thing pāti, patta, vitta, sarāva, dhāropa, poṇa, hana³ or pisīla. Thus as they recognize it as this or that in various provinces, so does a person use it obstinately clinging and adhering to

it, saying: "This (word) alone is true, and rest is false." Monks, this is attachment to the provincial language and deviation from recognized parlance."

Explaining the implication of 'clinging to the provincial dialect and the overriding the recognized parlance' the Buddha explains:

"And o monks, what is non-attachment to the provincial dialect and non-deviation from recognized parlance? Here, monks, in certain provinces they call the same thing *pāti*, *patta*, *vitta*, *sarāva*, *dhāropa*, *poṇa*, *hana* or *pisīla*. Thus they recognize it as this or that in various provinces, so does a person use it as such and does not cling to it, thinking: "Indeed these venerable ones use this word for that thing." Monks, this is non-attachment to provincial dialect and non-deviation from recognized parlance."

The Buddha says further that not to be obstinately attached to a provincial dialect and non-deviation from recognized parlance is a non-conflict path (*araṇa paṭipadā*) as well as a right path (*sammā paṭipadā*) while obstinate attachment to a provincial dialect and deviation from recognized parlance is a wrong path (*micchā paṭipadā*) and also a path of conflict (*sarāṇa paṭipadā*).⁴ From the above it is possible to arrive at several conclusions:

- I The Buddha preached in several dialects. While at Kapilavatthu he must have preached in his mother tongue Nepalese
- II In order to make the audience understand his message better, he was concerned about the dialect spoken in the locality where the preaching was performed
- III Using a dialect of a different province where another dialect is spoken creates a conflicting situation, which is also a wrong course of action. This is more so in India where the dialects are designated on caste basis and social status
- IV To avoid a conflicting situation, the monks should adhere to common idiom of the locality where the preaching is performed. It is the correct course of action to be taken.
- V The Buddha relates eight dialectal forms of the word 'bowl' to illustrate the dialectal diversity in the provinces. Out of the eight words, *pāti* and *patta* have etymological connection to Indo-Aryan.⁵ '*Pisila*' is a dialectal form of '*pishala*'. Except '*vitta*', '*dhāropa*', others may or may not be Indo-Aryan origin. However it proves the fact that the Buddha had preached in those dialects, where they were spoken and instructed the monks to be multi-lingual for the purpose of disseminating the teaching effectively according to the language spoken by the audience they address. In fact, since the theme of the discourse is the mode of preaching to be followed for

the successful dissemination of the teaching, the Buddha has documented here some of the crucial issues of conflicting situations which are to be avoided.

An Instance of the Buddha Using Different Media

Although the Pali records do not betray any concrete reference to the Buddha's use of different dialects or languages, we have an interesting reference in the *Taisho Issaikyo* to this effect, where it is stated that the Buddha has preached in Sanskrit, Tamil and one of the Mleccha (barbarian) languages too.

The reference is related to the conversion of four great heavenly kings; Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Virūḍha(ka), Virūpākṣa and Vaiśravaṇa on the bank of Mandākinī Lake near Uduma. The theme of his discourse is found in the Tibetan *Udānavarga*, the text often compared to the *Dhammapada* but containing more stanzas than it. ⁶ It runs thus:

“ When the body is worn out, sensation cooled, perception destroyed, volition appeased, consciousness stilled: such is truly the end of suffering. Limit yourself seeing what ought to be seen; to hearing, contemplating and knowing what ought to be heard, contemplated and known. Anything that differs from that is painful, very painful. Such is truly the end of suffering. The absence of contact, the absence of joy, appeasement, universal renunciation: Such is truly the end of suffering.”

The Buddha began to preach to them in Sanskrit:

‘jirnah kayo vedanā sūtibhūtā Saṃjñā niruddha saṃskāra vyupasāntā Vijñānam astam gatam esa evāntoduhkasya.

*Dr̥ṣṭe dr̥ṣṭamatram bhavatu śrute cintite vijñāte vijñātamātram.*⁷

When the Buddha uttered these two stanzas *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* and *Virūḍha* could understand. But other two could not. Then he preached to *Virūpākṣa* in Dravidian language, a barbarian tongue (*dasyuvāc*), which is the common language of South India.⁸ He used another Mleccha Language to explain the doctrine to *Vaiśravaṇa*. These four heavenly kings understood the teaching and embraced Buddhism. They were entrusted with the work of guarding the Good Law in the four cardinal directions.

Although the episode has a mythological touch, what is important for us is, it highlights the Buddha's ability to speak different tongues. Quoting *Taisho Issaikyo* on the above episode and also many other instances Lamotte gives a detailed description depicting the Buddha's prerogative of gift of tongues.⁹

Chandasa and Sakāya Nirutti

There is another important episode in the *Cullavaggapāli* referring to two brahmin monks called Yamelu and Tekula, who requested for the Buddha's permission to put the word of the Buddha into *chandasa*, because they could not tolerate the way the word of the Buddha was being recited by the monks of different clans and castes. Since this episode throws a flood of light on the issue under discussion, the relevant passage is quoted fully here:

"At that time there were two monks named Yamelu and Tekula, brothers of Brahmin birth, who had lovely voices and good articulation of words. They approached the Buddha and said to him."

'There are monks of different names (nānā nāmā), from various clans (nānā gottā), various origins (nānā jaccā) and various families (nānā kulā). They corrupt the word of the Buddha by repeating it in their own mode of expression (sakāya niruttiyā). We would put the word of the Buddha to chandasa.'

Then the Buddha replied:

'The word of the Buddha should not be put into chandasa. Whoever does that is guilty of the offense of wrong doing (dukkata). I enjoin O, monks, to learn the word of the Buddha in their own mode of expression'¹⁰

The two expressions '*sakāya nirutti*' and '*chandasa*' have given rise to diverse opinions. These two expressions are found in two contexts of the same episode: In the context of accusation of the two monks and in the Buddha's injunction. To most of the scholars, '*sakāya nirutti*' is the most intriguing usage in the passage. To our utter disappointment Bhadanta Buddhaghosa while commenting the word, purposely as it seems, avoids the '*sakāya nirutti*' found at the beginning of this particular situation, but comments it at the Buddha's injunction and says: "*Here sakāya nirutti is sakā nirutti., it is the current speech of Magadha as spoken by the Buddha. ,*"¹¹

Geiger also just as Bhadanta Buddhaghosa did, neglecting the first context of the use translates the Buddha's injunction as "*I ordain the words of the Buddha to be learnt in his own language (i.e. in Magadhi, the language used by the Buddha himself).*"¹² Due to these definitions, what has actually happened is, the subject of accusation of the two Brahmin monks has turned to be a permissive injunction. Lamotte saying that the expression is easy to interpret and gives some of the interpretations given to it by scholars:

Rhys Davids, Oldenberg and Edgerton: '*Each in his own dialect*

S. Levy: '*Each in his own manner of speaking*

I. de. La Vallee Poussin: '*Each with his own pronunciation*'

É. J. Thomas: '*In his own grammar*

Lin Li-kouang: 'Each in his own dialect

J. Filliozat: 'With his own verbal interpretation'

1. Renou: 'Each with his own mode of expression i. e. in his own dialect'¹³

With regard to the word 'chandas' also several interpretations have been given:

Rhys Davids, Oldenberg and Geiger: 'Sanskrit verse'

S. Levi: 'Verse'

1. de La Vallee Poussin: 'Sanskrit'

E. J. Thomas: 'Metre'

Lin Li-kouang: 'Sanskritization of Buddhist texts'

J. Filliozat: 'Versification in the Vedic manner'

F. Edgerton: 'Vedic'

1. Renou: 'Not Sanskrit bhāshā, but 'chandas: the only form of speech known at that time apart from the Middle Indian dialects'

The word has been defined by the commentator Bhadanta Buddhaghosa as "the mode of expression in Sanskrit language as in the Veda".¹⁴ The commentator's explanation is most plausible and reasonable. It agrees also with the modern scholarship in some way or other. The students of Sanskrit grammar know that the *Sārasvata* Grammar often refers to Vedic grammatical peculiarities stating 'chandasi', meaning 'in the Vedic language'. The word originally meant prosody, the pattern of rhythm and sound used in metrical compositions. Since the Vedic hymns are prosodic, it seems that Vedic Sanskrit also came to be known as, *chandas*. This is similar to the semantic change of the word Pali, which originally was used to differentiate the text from the commentary; later it acquired the meaning of the language by which the texts have been written; namely, the language of the *Tipitaka*

Therefore when we examine these facts and figures critically, it seems that the Buddha forbade the translating of the Buddha's teaching to Vedic Sanskrit and chanting the texts with intonations used in the recitation in the Vedas, but ordered each disciple to learn the word of the Buddha in his own dialect.¹⁵

According to *Mahāsārika Vinaya*, the Buddha has given permission to read and recite in keeping with the dialectal pronunciation preserving the concepts as they are. *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* records that the Buddha advised a Brahmin not to mix the Buddhist Sutras with the language of the heretics, but permitted to recite and learn them according to the interpretation of vernacular regional languages. *Sarvāstivāda Vinaya* refers to two brahmins, who had been converted to Buddhism recited *Sūtras* with the intonation followed in the recitation of the four Vedas as they had been accustomed to. When one of them

died, the other could not find a suitable companion to recite fluently. Then he approached the Buddha and reported the matter to the Buddha. The Buddha forthwith prohibited the reciting the *Sūtras* in accordance with the intonations of the heretical books. *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* also records the incident in the same manner. Here the grief stricken monk visits venerable Śāriputra, who taught him prolonged sounds even better. When the Buddha was informed of this, the Buddha prohibited reciting *Sūtras* with melodies and prolonged intonation, and the transgression of the rule was made an offense. Besides, if regional pronunciation required the intonation to be prolonged was permitted.

16

The Yamelu-Tekula episode is preserved in one form or other in the schools stated above. Sarvāstivāda does not mention specifically about the permission to use dialects whereas the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* records an echo of the Buddha's permission to use dialects. It is pretty clear from the above references that Buddhism does not display any linguistic prejudice in any measure. The Buddha while granting permission to use dialects according to the audience and advised not to put the word of the Buddha to Vedic language and to recite and intone as the Vedic chants.

Venerable W. Rahula also following the same line of the argument says in his discussion on the issue:

“... the expression *sakāya niruttiyā* 'in the *Vinaya* in the *Cullavagga* quoted above refers not exclusively to Magadhi, but to the dialect of different provinces including Magadhi and any other dialects which the Buddha himself might, or might not, have spoken”¹⁷

Arahant Mahinda who introduced the *Tipiṭaka* to Sri Lanka could teach it quite easily to the locals in Elu or ancient Singhalese language. Hence he had no need to translate it to Sinhala. The first redaction of the *Tipiṭaka* might have been done in Māgadhi at the first council at Rajagaha in Magadha territory. The successive two councils which were held in two Magadhan cities, Vaiśāli and Pāṭaliputra also rehearsed it in the same language. It is quite clear from Asokan inscriptions and the *Kathāvatthu* that by the time of the 3rd council in the 3rd century B. C., the language in question had undergone changes. Anyhow, following the language of the rest of the works of *Tipiṭaka*, Venerable Moggaliputta Tissa compiled the work in the same language, unavoidably leaving remnants of Magadhism here and there.

References to Ambiguity of Language

There are references to ambiguity of language in the Pali canon. The genuine instance of it is recorded in connection with the confusion between

Direct Meaning (*nītattha*) and Indirect Meaning (*neyyattha*). Distinction of the two was not quite clear to some due to the inherent ambiguity of the language. It is stated that those who are unable to distinguish the difference between these two, misrepresent the Buddha. ¹⁸ Another instance is the Buddha's explanation of the questions that ought to be replied with an absolute explanation (*ekamsa - vyākaraṇīya*) counter-question (*Paṭipucchā-vyākaraṇīya*), questions ought to be replied analytically (*vibhajja-vyākaraṇīya*) and questions to be set aside (*thapanīya*) in the four kinds of explanation of questions.¹⁹ Due to ambiguity a counter-question or questions have to be put to the questioner to get his question cleared. In some instances to give a comprehensive answer the questions have to be analyzed and answered. The answers to questions to be set aside are defined as useless or meaningless. On the other hand, the answers to them lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

Difference in Language does not Necessarily Involve its Meaning

In the *Isigili Sutta* the Buddha says that there was a different name and different designation for the Vebhāra Mountain in the past,²⁰ It is amounting to the saying that words are labels and liable to change from time to time.

Trans-empirical is beyond Verbal Predication

Buddhism says that trans-empirical experience is beyond verbal predication, because it cannot be expressed or understood empirically. *It is deep, immeasurable and unfathomable like the great ocean.*²¹ The *Suttanipāta* illustrates it precisely:

*“The one who has attained the goal is without measure; he does not have that with which one can speak of”*²²

Knowing all the advantages and disadvantages of the use of language the Buddha used it as it is used by the people in order to communicate with them. Stating the different words, milk (*khīra*), curd (*dadhi*), butter (*navanīta*), ghee (*sappi*) and junket (*sappimaṇḍa*) used for different phases of milk, the Buddha says in the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta*:

*“These are Citta expressions, turns of speech, designations, common uses in the world which the Tathāgata makes use of, without being led astray by them.,”*²³

There is a tendency in Buddhism to give an ethical twist to roots and definitions to Pali words which are ethically and doctrinally important. Following the example of the Buddha later commentators also gave ethical definitions to roots and words highlighting Buddhist concepts.

End Notes

- 1 *Sa māgadhī mūlabhāsā- narāyādikappikā*
Brāhmaṇacassutālāpā - sambuddhācā'pi bhāsare
Sambuddhe mūlabāsāya - desente dbammamuttamanī
Jānanti sabbe sattā 'pi - sakabbāsaṃ'va attano - Rūpasiddhi
- 2 H. Geiger - *Pāli Literature and Language*, pp. 2, 5
- 3 A foot note in the PTS text gives this word
- 4 *AraṇaVibhaṅga Sutta - M.* pp. 236-237
- 5 *Pali-English Dictionary* (PTS) derives *patta* from Vedic *pāti* and *pibati* (drinks) and traces the root to Indo-European *poi* "and "pi". (Latin: *bibo* to drink and *poculum*= beaker)
- 6 *Udānavarga* XXVI 16-18, p.88; Tibetan Edition by H. Beckh. See also pp. 550-551 of *History of Indian Buddhism* by E. Lamotte
- 7 The theme of these stanzas are found in the Buddha's address to Bāhiya in Udāna and venerable Sāriputta's admonition to Anāthapiṇḍika at his death bed - *Ud.* p. 10 and *A.* III, pp. 292 ff. respectively
- 8 *Taisho Issaikyo* 1546
- 9 E. Lamotte - *History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 551-552
- 10 *Vin.* II, p. 139.
- 11 "*Sakāya niruttiyā'ti ettha sakā nirutti nāma sammāsambuddhena vuttappakāro māgadhiko vohāro, sakāya niruttiyā- VinA. Vol IV, p. 416.*
- 12 W. Geiger - *Pāli Literature and Language*, p. 7
- 13 E. Lamotte - *History of Indian Buddhism*, pp. 552-553
- 14 "*Vedaṃ viya sakkatabhāsāya vācanāmaggaṃ*" - *VinA* IV, p. 410 Ed: SayabU Pye
- 15 E. Lamotte - *History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 553
- 16 *op. cit.* pp. 553-554
- 17 Ven. W. Rahula - The article on "*Pāli as a Language for Transmitting an Authentic Religious Tradition*" in the *Humour in Buddhist Literature*
- 18 *A.* I, p. 60
- 19 *A.* II, p. 46

- 20 *"Imassa kho vebhāra pabbatassa aññā va sāmāññā ahosi, aññā paññatti."* -
Isigili Sutta, M. III, p. 69 ff.
- 21 *"Gambhīro appameyyo duppariyogā ho seyyathā 'pi mahāsamuddo"* - M. I, p. 487
- 22 *"Atthamgatassa na pamāṇamatthi Yena nam vajju tam tassa natthi"* - Sn 1076
- 23 *"Imā kho citta lokasamaññā, lokaniruttiyo, lokavohārā lokapññattiyo sā hi
Tathāgato voharati aparāmasan 'ti"* - D. I. p. 202