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Did the Buddha Speak Pāli?

An Investigation of The *Buddha-Vacana* and Origins of Pāli

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Abstract

Traditionally South and Southeast Buddhism, which we now call Theravāda Buddhism, claims that the language of the Buddha is 'Pāli' and hence the language of their sacred texts (Tipiṭaka=three canons). In this essay, I investigate the notion of the Pāli language by reconstructing existing Pāli literatures and contemporary works on Pāli studies. Among other issues, this investigation explores the following issues: the language (vacana) of the Buddha, the multilingualism and geopolitics, the home of Pāli and the origination of Pāli.

01: Prologue

In this essay, I propose to review the term *Buddhavacana*, “the authentic words of the Buddha,” and provide a critical assessment of the use of language in Theravāda Buddhism. At the outset, I want to make it clear that the distinction between the words of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*) and the language of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*, the canonical literatures of the Theravāda Buddhism. The words of the Buddha specifically refer to the language or dialect spoken by the Buddha himself where as the language of the *Tipiṭaka* is the later evolved language which now we call Pāli. Though, literary speaking, the term ‘*Buddhavacana*’ refers to the words of the Buddha, however, I will

use the equivalent terms “the language of the Buddha.” What was the spoken language of the Buddha? Was it Pāli, Sanskrit or something else? How do we ascertain that Pāli-language (*Pālibhāṣā*) was the spoken language of the Buddha? In a lecture I gave in 2005 at the Department of Buddhist Studies, Tribhuvan University in Nepal, I presented the crisis of the differences between the language of the Buddha and the language of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*.

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The *Buddhavacana* is the general usage for the teaching of the Buddha in the Pāli texts as noted above. Besides that usage, the lesser known term “*bhagavato-vacana*”, the words of the Exalted One, is also mentioned in the Pāli as the actual words of the Buddha (Bond 24). Throughout the linguistic history of Theravāda Buddhism, it is a commonly held notion that the language of the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures is ‘Pāli’. For Theravadins, Pāli *Tipiṭaka* represents the words of the Buddha (Bond 1). Phra Payutto, a Thai Pāli scholar-monk, considers the words of the Buddha (*Buddhavacana*) in the Pāli canon are the most authoritative standard religious texts (Seeger 9).

Since the inception of Pāli/Theravāda Buddhist studies in the West, particularly in the United Kingdom, there has been a more generalized interest in the linguistic study of the Pāli canon. While Buddhist scholarships regarding the Pāli-language (*Pālibhāṣā*) and its literatures in cross-canonical contexts have figured most prominently in Western Buddhist studies, with a few exceptions, the questions regarding the language of the Buddha and his immediate disciples paid relatively little attention.

Nevertheless, against the traditional concept of the *Pālibhāṣā*, the Pāli scholars of the 19th century, particularly H. Bechert (1980), K R.

Norman (1983/2002), Williams Pruitt (1987), Oscar von Hinüber (1996), Walpola Rahula (1997), and more recently, Kate Crosby (2004) not only began questioning the authenticity of the language of the Buddha, but also the language of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* as a whole. With a critical cross examination of the Pāli texts and the Buddhist chronicles from the perspective of phonology, philology, phonetic, archeological and inscriptional evidences, soon they came to the unanimous conclusion that Pāli was not the spoken language of the Buddha.

Hinüber further argues that “Pāli has been a spoken language neither in Magadha nor elsewhere. For it is possible to infer from linguistic peculiarities of this language that it has been created as some kind of lingua franca presumably used in a large area at a time considerably later than the Buddha” (Hinüber 5). Both theoretically and evidently, if the Pāli was never spoken by Gotama the Buddha and was not even a spoken language in the Buddha’s time as Hinüber confidently suggested, then the obvious question is: What was the actual language of the Buddha? In what language(s) or dialect(s) did the Buddha communicate with his disciples and followers alike?

On other hand, Buddhist scholars are also aware that Northern Buddhist tradition or Mahāyāna Buddhism preserved their textual corpus in Sanskrit. Is it an indication that the Buddha adopted Sanskrit as a mean of imparting his dharma? The Buddha did not adopt Sanskrit because not all Mahāyāna texts are preserved in pure Sanskrit. Moreover, we know from the beginning that the Buddha was not in favor of Sanskrit. In the Pāli *Vinaya* it is mentioned that the Buddha strongly reprimanded the monks for using the metrical form of Sanskrit (Horner 194). Thus, KR. Norman, a Cambridge Pāli philologist concludes “it, therefore, seems very likely that the Buddha’s sermons were preached in a non-Sanskritic language” (Norman 2002: 137). This is the mystery for scholars of Pāli studies to determine the actual language of the Buddha. If the Buddha used

neither Pāli nor Sanskrit, what language did he use for daily conversation as well as regular religious sermons?

With a more than two millennia old history, the answer is not easy and straight forward. However, based on my own criteria of the linguistic study, namely, philology, phonetic, phonology, figurativeness, stylistic structure and semantic deviation, I strongly feel that there is another way of looking at the *vacana* of the Buddha and thence language of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*. In this criterion or approach, my specific goal is to reiterate the problematic issue of the *Buddhavacana* and *Pālibhāsā* by reconstructing the works of the contemporary scholars and Pāli studies. In a related manner-approach, I consider following cross textual methodologies: (1) Geo-political regions in the times of the Buddha or at least in pre-Aśokan period, (2) *Varṇsa* (chronicles) literatures of the South and Southeast Asian, (3) the home of Pāli and (4) etymological interpretation of *nirutti* and *chandasa*. I do not, however, guarantee that this approach will give us an accurate answer for the language of the Buddha.

02: Multilingualism and Geo-politics

Regarding the *vacana* of the Buddha, it is important to have some ideas about sociolinguistics position and political regions of ancient India. In one of the early Pāli canonical texts known as the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, we read a list of sixteen great independent and republican states (*solasamahājanapada*) in ancient India (AN: I.213; iv.252 etc.). Similarly the *Dīgha-nikāya*, another collection of the early Buddha’s doctrinal teachings, informs us the knowledge about the seven sovereignties (*satta-bharatā*) with their respective capitals (DN: II, 235). Of the sixteen rival monarchies, in terms of politic and economical powers, the four kingdoms (Māgadha, Kosala, Varṇsa, and Avānti) were well established in 5th century BCE (Cakravarti 8). In the *Suttanipāta*-Pāli, it has been clearly stated that the Sakyas, the tribal lineage perhaps founded by Suddhodana, the father of the Buddha, were subordinate to the king of Kosala (Sn: v. 422).

According to Hajima Nakamura, the Sakyas had a republican government (Nakamura, 36). Nakamura's comments suggest that the Buddha's father was not as powerful as the king Pesanadi of Kosala.

Coming back to the issue of the language of the Buddha, it is assumable that they were various dialects and indigenous languages that were widespread in all those states. From the geopolitical records mentioned in the Pāli sources, we can visualize that the Buddha traveled to all those places and gave dhamma talks to different people. The biography of the Buddha, though composed later, plainly indicates the Buddha was born in Kapilavatthu, the capital city of the Sakyan Kingdom (Kalupahana 1) which is now in Nepal, but he spent most of his times in Māgadha's region. I suspect that the language of Kapilavatthu is entirely, if not partially different from the language of Māgadha. In this regard, what language(s) or dialect(s) did the Buddha use to convey his moral dhamma or spoke when he voyaged back and forth from one state to another? It is unlikely that the Buddha spoke a single language, whether Māgadhi or a Kosalian-language.

Although the specific language of the Buddha is still debatable, Pāli linguistic critics like myself are fully aware of that the Buddha may have used multiple local and native dialects. When the Buddha spoke with common masses, kings, and ministers in different kingdoms and places, he might have employed many dialects. He was perhaps a multilingual person.

It is an unfortunate that those dialects are no longer. Thus, the *Buddhavacana* remains mysterious. Although those tribal dialects or state-languages of different kingdoms at that time did not survive, scholars of Indian linguistics generally consider that they are a part of the Middle Indo-Aryan language family (MIA). In his survey of the Indo-Aryan language, Dhanesh Jain notes: "varieties of MIA were the chosen languages of Buddhism and Jainism since about 500BC. To reach the masses, he continues, the two religious faiths [Buddhism and Jainism] opted to use the spoken language" (Jain 50).

But what were those chosen or spoken languages? Following Despande's comparative work on Sanskrit and Prākṛit (Despande 1993), Jain also believes that the Buddha used Prākṛit dialect to spread his doctrine (Jain 50). At this conjecture, in my position, it is too early to conclude that the Buddha would have used Prākṛit dialect for propagating his dhamma. Because earlier we have noted the Buddha wandered from place to place. It is no doubt that each place might have their own dialect. In accordance with audience needs and capabilities to understand, the Buddha probably has used multiple vernaculars and other common parlances including Prākṛit.

03: Further Complication

In connection with these geopolitical records and multiple sociolinguistic positions of the MIA-language, I want to concentrate briefly on the Buddhist chronicles (*vaṃsa*), questioning the authoritative language and linguistic pride in these chronicles. The *vacana* of the Buddha becomes even more problematic when we read the Theravāda historical annals (*vaṃsa*). Like most Indian authors, the medieval Buddhist authors of South and Southeast Asia take enormous pride in their quality of writing in respect to the language that they adopted. *Vaṃsa* literatures, although they are written in Pāli, should never be considered the language of the Buddha. They are the works of individual as well as collective writers long after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*.

The South and Southeast Asian Buddhist chronicles such as *Mahāvāsaṃsa*, the Great Chronicles of Sri Lanka (Geiger 1938.), *Sāsanāvāsaṃsa*, the Burmese Buddhist Chronicles (Law 1952) and other chronicles of Buddhism, proudly claim that Gotama the Buddha had visited from time to time to their respective countries. *Mahāvāsaṃsa*, written in 5th century ADE, for instance, opens with an introductory remark of the Buddha's three visits to Sri Lanka (Bullis 36ff); while the Burmese Buddhist history (*Sāsanāvāsaṃsa*), composed in 1897, narrates that the Buddha, along with five hundred

disciples, visited Burma for four times (Bischoff 5ff). Similarly Donald Swearer finds that the Buddha's miracles visit to Thailand (Swearer 93). One of the monks from Laos who now resides in Colorado, US, told me that the Buddha visited Laos several times. I could not verify his claim from the Laotian (Buddhist) textual source, as Laotian Buddhism is relatively new in Buddhist studies and virtually no resources are available when I started this paper.

Not surprisingly all these chronicles were written in Pāli, some earlier and some later. Written in Pāli does not, however, mean that the language of the Buddha is Pāli, which the authors of the chronicles adopted. The Buddha's incredible visit to the Island of Lanka is still questionable for number of reasons. The same reasons could apply to other countries as well. How did the Buddha come to Sri Lanka? Regrettably *Mahāvamsa* does not have the answer for this question. It seems very likely that these chronicles are creative arts of writing and innovative information for Buddhists in their respective countries rather than historic fact. I am not, thus, surprised to see Rahula's conclusion who instead of co-coordinating with the traditional views and attributing to the Buddha as the introductory person of Buddhism to Sri Lanka attributes to Mahinda, the favored son of the Emperor Aśoka (Rahula 1966: 48).

Contradictory to the Pāli-*Mahāvamsa* narrative story, the *Larīkāvātara sūtra*, a purely Sanskrit Mahāyāna text, also mentions the Buddha's arrival in Sri Lanka and his teaching to the demonic Rāvana (Suzuki 1973). Sri Lanka is closer to the mainland India than Burma/Myanmar and Thailand. These countries are geographically, culturally, and linguistically different from India as they are separated by a vast ocean and high mountains. Nonetheless, if the Buddha would have been to Sri Lanka or other countries in Southeast Asia, which most likely he was not, then what language(s) or dialect(s) he employed to exchange the words with the local people? Among other questions, following questions are also important in this respect: Did the Buddha preach in Pāli or Sinhala Prākṛit when he came to Sri Lanka? How can we be certain that the Buddha gave

sermon to Rāvana in Sanskrit? The sūtra (*Larīkāvātara*) is written in Sanskrit does not mean that the Buddha spoke in Sanskrit. Even if we assume that the Buddha visited Sri Lanka, it is still hard to believe that Buddha spoke either Pāli, Sanskrit, or Sinhalese. He possibly used the local dialect, which Gair identifies as Sinhala Prākṛit (Gair 2003).

According to the late venerable Walpula Rahula, Mahānāma, the author of *Mahāvamsa*, compels to compose *Mahāvamsa*, because, "there was a history on the same subject written by the ancients (*porāṇehi*) which was full of faults such as repetitions and unnecessary details" (Rahula 1966: xxii). Since Rahula did not raise the question of in what language this history was written, I am now curious about pre-Buddhist language in Sri Lanka or the native language before arrival of Buddhism. Based on epigraphical and inscriptional evidences James Gair considers thus, "the earliest attested form of the language, Sinhala-Prakrit, date from the third and second century BCE, following the arrival of Buddhism in the third century BC" (Gair, 2003). The language of the Island (*larīkadipa*) was perhaps Sinhala Prākṛit at that time but it is still difficult justify as to whether the Buddha knew Sinhala Prākṛit or the citizens of the island knew whatever language of the Buddha.

04: The Home of Pāli

Where is the home of Pāli? Where does the language of the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures originate? The Indologists and Buddhologists, from both East and West, struggled to arrive at the conclusive consensus on the issues of the original location of the Pāli. Instead they offer contradictory conclusions (Harza 1994/Gieger 1978/Lamotte 1988). The authors of the Pāli *aṭṭhakathā* (commentaries), *ṭīkā* (sub-commentaries) and *Vamsa* (chronicles) identify the original home of Pāli as "Māgadha/ī", one of the politically powerful kingdoms in the time of the Buddha and after him. The commentaries, without valid documentation, further claim

that Māgadhi is the root languages of all languages (*sabbesaṃ mūlabhāsāya māgadhiya niruttiyā*: Mhv XXXVII: 224/Vsm: 441, 34). For Theravādins, these commentarial and other chronicle proofs are reliable enough to believe that the *Buddhavacana* is actually Māgadhi.

According to the *Mahāvamsa*, Mahinda brought Pāli *Tipiṭaka* as well as its commentaries and translated to *Sīhalabhāsā*, the language of Sri Lanka for the well being of the people in the Island (Adikaram 1964). Few centuries later, Buddhaghosa was asked by his mentor to retranslate the words of the Buddha in to the Māgadha-language (Ñānamoli 1999: xxiv). The author of the *Duṭṭhavaṃsa*, Dhammakitti, writes that he has composed the text in the Māgadha tongue (*niruttiya māghadikāya*) for the benefit of people of other countries (Rahula 1997). Similarly Vacissara, author of *Thūpavaṃsa*, claims that he has written in the idiom of the Māgadha (*yasmā ca māghadaniruttikato pi thūpavaṃsa*, Thup: 4/Jayawikrama 147).

In the *Cūlavamsa*, King Vijayabāhu II himself wrote a most excellent letter in the Māgadha tongue and sent it to Burma (Cul: LXXX-6-7/Geiger 1973: 176). Their (Pāli commentators) definite indication of the Pāli to the Māgadhi (*magadhī bhāsā*) is understandable; because it was there in Māgadha the Buddha ended up most of his time with the king Bimbisāra, one of the royal patronages of Indian Buddhism. Māgadha was also a stronghold center for Buddhist activities after the death of the Buddha.

From this textual evidence it appears that Māgadhi could have become an international language. On account of these commentarial scriptural supports early orientalist such as Geiger (Geiger 1943: 1-8) and Winternitz attribute the language of the Theravāda texts to an old Māgadhi because Theravāda tradition does not make a distinction between Pāli and Māgadha, but the same (Winternitz 7). On the ground philology, other orientalist, particularly H. Kern (Kern 7) and Franke localize the home of Pāli to the Kalinga and Ujjeni

respectively (Thomas 41). A complete different picture emerges from Rhys Davids's opinion, who consistently thinks that Pāli literary language took shape from the spoken dialect of Kosala. More to his point, he argues "the dialect of Kosala was not only confined its at the time of the Buddha, but also equal applicable to east and west from Delhi to Patna, and north and south to from Sāvatti to Avanti" (Davids 153-4). Different opinions about the exact location of the Pāli are extensively discussed by Kanai Lal Hazra (Hazra 1994).

Indeed, it might seem unnecessary to argue Rhys Davids's conclusion. Because Kapilavatthu, one of the republican states in the Kosala's kingdom, was not only the birth place of the Buddha but also the place where he was educated and learned science and arts. It was the centre of his primary education and language training. Whatever location the Pāli might have been, what we know is that Pāli is not Māgadhi or vice versa, although they had some dialectic links to each other. Norman further developed this assertion: "we know of Māgadhi as described by the grammarians in latter times, however, enables us to say that Pāli is not Māgadhi, and although we have no direct evidence about the characteristics of Māgadhi in the centuries before Asoka, we can deduce with some certainty that Pāli does not agree with that either" (Norman 1983: 3).

O5: Pluralistic and Liberal Attitude Towards the Language

On the liberal attitude towards the linguistic approach in Pāli Buddhism, it is interesting to explore the implicit meaning of the term "*chandasa*" and "*nirutti*." In the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya*, we find that an assertion of the rules which confirms that the Buddha was totally against Sanskrit vernacular. He even prohibited monks using Sanskrit as a mean of speaking dhamma: "Monks, the speech of the Awakened One should not be given in metrical form [*chandaso āropema*]. Whoever should give it, [dhamma teaching] there is an offence of wrong doing [*dukkhatāpatti*]" (Horner 194). Like most of the enigmatic words in the suttas, the *Vinaya* does not

clarify what is meant by *chanda*. In the *Samantapāsādikā*, Buddhaghosa identifies *chanda* as the ancient Vedic-prosody-dialect (Smk 306). In another commentary, he attributes it to *Sakatabhasa* or Sanskrit language (VA 1214). If “*chanda*” was none other than the Sanskrit or Vedic metre as Buddhaghosa recognized, then, we are in the position to argue that the *Buddhavacana* is not Sanskrit. Then, in what language did early Buddhist monastic communities (*sangha*) learn the *Buddhadhamma*? The answer is found in the *Vinaya* text itself. For instance, the *Vinaya* text records “I allow you, monks, to learn the speech of the Awakened One according to his own dialect [*sakāya niruttīyā*]” (Horner 194). To this point, it would be appropriate to say that the Buddha was realistic in terms of selecting a language and linguistic approach to learning his doctrinal dhamma.

The Pāli dictionary provides a wide range of meanings of the term *nirutti* such as grammatical analysis, etymological interpretation; pronunciation; dialect; and a way of speaking (PED q.v.) Edward J. Thomas considers “*nirutti*” as grammar and “*chando*” as metre (Thomas 253). Thomas’s literary interpretation of the term is doubtful. In fact, Winternitz objected to his interpretation and argues that “he does not think it is possible that *sakaya nirutti* can mean each in his own language (Winternitz vol.ii. 577).

According to Buddhaghosa, *sakaya-niruttiya* represents a form of *Māgadhabhāsā*, language of the Māgadha, which was adopted by Gotama the Buddha: *sakaya niruttiya ti ettha saka nirutti nama sammāsambuddhena vuttappakaro māghadhako vohāra* (Vinaya commentary/VA 1214). He further, in another work, claims that the Buddha entrusted his word as contained in the tradition he formed, only in the Māgadhi language (VibA: 388). This data does not support our surmise that *sakaya-nirutti* is none other than the speech of Māgadha which the Buddha used for his dhammic instruction. Because *sakaya-nirutti* could also mean our own language or dialect. According to Bimala C. Law it is a native language. He says, “one’s mother tongue or vernacular would also be an interpretation of *sakaya-nirutti* in consistent with the context as well as with the Buddha’s spirit of rationalism” (Law xiv). Hazra also thinks the

same. In a pluralistic sense, he writes, “it can mean a more of expression, a vehicle of expression, diction, an idiom, and a language, to which one might claim as one’s own dialect, not pre-supposedly only the words of the Buddha” (Hazra 5ff).

06: Concluding Remarks

We have explored some conceptual problems and contradictory conclusions among scholars of Buddhism about the language of the Buddha and Pāli language. Despite these conflicting opinions among the Pāli linguistics, I remain to the view that the Buddha spoke several dialects which are now lost. Once Steven Collins notes that “As is well known, the word Pāli was not originally the name of a language, but a term meaning firstly a line, bridge, or causeway, and thence a ‘text’” (Collins 1990: 91). Buddhaghosa also testifies in his writing saying that he was retranslating *Sinhalabhāsā* (Sinhalese/Sri Lankan language) into a beautiful or delightful language (*manoramābhāsā*) in conformity with the style of *Tanti*, not into Pāli (Rahula 1997). Both Collins and Rahula’s remarks plainly suggest that the Pāli was never spoken or a specific language at all but a ‘text’ e.g. Buddhist canon/*Tipiṭaka*. In the Medieval Sri Lankan and Southeast Asian Buddhist writings, we find the generic notion of the Pāli as an official language (*Pālibhāsā*) of the Buddha and hence the language of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*. According to Pāli scholars of Theravāda Buddhism, *Pālibhāsā* or Pāli-language as the specific named language is developed from 12th century to 17th Century (Pruitt 1987/Crosby 2004).

We have also explored the home of Pāli, which also remains anonymous. Lamotte writes “it is certain that the [Buddha’s] language originated on the Indian mainland, but its home has not yet been determined with certainty” (Lamotte 551). However most scholars are in favor of Māgadha including Norman (Norman 2002). Although the actual language of the Buddha and origins of Pāli are unknown, the existence of Pāli literatures in which the words of the Buddha and his immediate disciples were enshrined is of immense value to the students of Buddhist philosophy, psychology,

comparative religious studies, science, history, folklore, grammar, philologist, linguistic and so forth.

Notes

Abbreviation

AN: Aṅguttara-Nikāya
 Cul: Culavaṃsa
 DN: Dīgha-Nikāya
 Mhv: Mahāvaṃsa
 PED: Pali English Dictionary
 Sn: Suttanipāta
 Smk: Samantapāsādikā
 Thup: Thūpavaṃsa
 VA: Vinaya-Aṭṭhakathā
 VibA: Vibhaṅga- Aṭṭhakathā
 Vsm: Visuddhimagga.
 JPTS: Journal of Pali Text Society.

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