

The vital importance and challenge of translating the Dharma

An article by Viryabodhi

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(The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara Expounding the Dharma to a Devotee:
from a *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* Manuscript, the [MET Museum](https://www.metmuseum.org).)

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The first article in a series of articles on translation within Triratna, by Viryabodhi, co-ordinator of the International Triratna Translations Board (ITTB).

In these articles I wish to outline and discuss two main areas. The first is to do with the vital or even crucial importance of translating the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, into your mother tongue, native language or whichever term you use for the language you grew up with and which is closest to your heart. In discussing this, I also want to touch on issues such as wrong views, resistances, avoidance or perhaps simple laziness that may get in the way of this work – and maybe other things too. I will also try to bring out the wonderful possibility we have of communicating the Dharma and share a little of what has already been done, and is done, in terms of translation initiatives.

The second area is to address and share some of the main challenges that one meets or runs into or even gets hit by in translation work. I will also share some stories from translators throughout Triratna, their experiences and challenges.

It's vital and crucial to translate the Buddha's beautiful teaching into your mother tongue because the teaching – both in 'theory' and lived experience – has to touch you deeply if it is going to be the Dharma. It has to be and become ever more emotionally connected to your life and heart. In one famous and oft quoted passage Bhante Sangharakshita says: *'For most of us the central problem of the spiritual life is to find emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding.'*¹

I think it's fair to say that most people will find it easier and sometimes surprisingly rewarding when finding these emotional equivalents in their mother tongue or heart language. (You could say that emotions and the heart in some sense transcend language, but your mother tongue reaches further into the finer and deeper threads within you.)

Before writing about myself let me say something more about why I have written these articles. Some parts have been brewing within me for some time in response to what I have seen and heard in my local Swedish sangha.

First of all, I want to **raise our collective awareness** of the crucial importance of translation within Triratna; or to remind us. Because I clearly see the need and lack of translation, and that this need for translation is often not sufficiently recognised and given enough attention locally. This includes subtitling of key videos and 'live interpretation' at international Triratna events. (The most experienced people, who may also be the best qualified to translate, are for instance very often fully engaged with teaching and taking organisational responsibility within the movement.)

Secondly, and as a result of that, I wish to emphasise the continued and ongoing **need for funds and support** for translation work, across the whole movement.

¹ Sangharakshita, 'Perfect Emotion: Reason and Emotion in the Spiritual Life', *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*, chapter 2, *Complete Works*, volume 1.

And thirdly, I wish to **share what I and many of us from non-English speaking countries work with** and do in terms of translation and spreading the Dharma within Triratna. I will share some of our stories and challenges.

Although translation has been encouraged and emphasised by Bhante and others through the years, at the same time relatively small resources and energy have been given to translation. However, it has to be said that this is changing. I notice that more people are more aware of its importance and I'm told that people mention translation more often now.

Through the years and history of the FWBO/Triratna there has been a vigorous encouragement to spread the Dharma. Some of you may remember the catchy theme for the Order Convention at Wymondham College in 1997: **BREAKING OUT OF BRITAIN**. I don't recall that translation was highlighted or mentioned at all. No doubt some people were indeed inspired to 'break out of Britain'. (Maybe we should one day have a theme of 'Breaking out of the English language'!) I'm sure many people do think about how we communicate the Dharma in terms of the language we use, but I'm convinced we can do much, much more and I believe this is vital if we want to reach out to new generations.

Lastly I want to emphasise that translation will never be finished. Beyond translating what we (in the ITTB) have termed 'Core Books' by Bhante and others, there will be an ongoing need of translating new important texts and communications, as well as live interpretation and translation at International events. In fact I believe there is a backlog of material that should/needs to be translated or even prepared for translation, as in the case of subtitling important Dharma talks and communications by Sangharakshita.

In some situations translation hasn't been prioritised or there simply haven't been the necessary resources to translate some basic texts. This is especially true of small situations where there is only one or no Order member present. I'm personally sad about that, because I know it makes such a difference to people to have something in their own language.

Communication of the Dharma is a translation

You could argue that any communication of the Dharma is a translation. Like all Dharma practice, translation must be alive, vital and creative. It's not something we do once. It has to be pursued and 'conquered' or 're-established' time and time again. And all Dharma teaching (apart from the mind to mind transmissions perhaps!) happens in and through the medium of language. I would like to argue that any Dharma teaching (at the same time) has to be intimately concerned with (or linked to) translation in the broader sense, which implies an awareness of how we use words, concepts and images – and all the more so if we live in a non-English speaking country and teach the Dharma in our own language. I hardly need to remind you that we have a tremendous exemplar of this (in a broad way) in our Teacher, Urgyen Sangharakshita. I will have a bit more to say about this later as well.

About myself

I have worked with teaching and translating the Dharma into Swedish, my own mother tongue, for more than 25 years. Before that I lived and worked for the movement in England for ten years (1987–1997), at the Croydon Buddhist Centre and Rivendell Retreat Centre. During those years I lived pretty much a ‘full on’ English Triratna life and taught in English, although I also led meditation and shared the Dharma in Swedish whenever I visited the sangha in Stockholm during those years. Soon after returning to Stockholm in 1997, I started up Bodhi-förlaget (Bodhi publishing) and published the first book by Bhante in Swedish, *Människans väg mot upplysning* (*Human Enlightenment*), when Sangharakshita visited us not long after I moved back. I also started *Bodhi-bladet*, a printed Newsletter that saw 21 issues before it folded; sometimes I dream of restarting it. The translation work I’ve done is of books, poems, shorter texts and quotes by my precious teacher, Ugyen Sangharakshita. I have also translated a few Dharma books (paid work for other publishers) and many shorter Dharma texts by other Buddhist teachers, as well as a selection of poems by a range of poets. Apart from translating, I have also edited and checked numerous other texts and books on Buddhism before publication, both within and outside the movement.

I have been involved in editing many rough translations of texts. This sometimes consisted of extensive editing and painstaking review, until I could happily say that the dharmic content was accurate and that the Swedish language used was ‘natural’ (to me at the time), flowing and as elegant as possible. Initially, and for many years, this work received no remuneration (pay), but over the last seven years or so, since I stopped working full time for Triratna in Sweden, I have been trying to make a living from translation work, with modest success. I’m very fortunate to have friends who are happy to give me dana/donations for my Dharma work, and that I live in a men’s community and so am able to keep my living costs low. I have also been fortunate to receive several grants from the European Chairs Assembly (ECA), the FutureDharma Fund and from Bhante’s 90th Birthday fund.

Over all these years I have felt curiously passionate about translating Dharma texts. When I have heard a Dharma teaching, studied or explored a moving text, I have often instinctively wanted to render it into Swedish. This has happened more on retreat and sometimes, I must confess, it has been a bit compulsive and even somewhat a distraction – but nonetheless a felt need and a heart-wish. Put simply, I love grappling with a text and finding an appropriate translation of words and Buddhist terms in Swedish. Something within me is driving this and I’m very happy to go with it. In many ways this seems only natural and good, and I know I’m far from the only one who has experienced this. Many other non-English Triratna people have felt and done the same. Recently I discovered that Aryavasin, an Albanian Order member living in London, is doing this too. Even though you probably don’t understand Albanian, you can have a look at his [website](#) where he publishes the pieces he has translated. (My own website and blog is found at <https://viryabodhi.se>)

There is another level or dimension I want to touch on here. The urge I feel to translate is closely connected to my deep feeling and devotion for, or connection with, Urgyen Sangharakshita, even though those words hardly capture the ‘nature’ of it. Put simply, I love the way Bhante Sangharakshita explores and expresses the Dharma and there is a deep resonance with that dimension from which I imagine (or feel) it comes.

Although I mostly have had no problem understanding the Dharma that I have read and listened to in English, at least intellectually, including such dharmically ‘heavy works’ as Sangharakshita’s *A Survey of Buddhism* and *The Three Jewels*, there is still another level of understanding that opens up when I read and study the Dharma in my mother tongue. Or should I say: a deeper, fuller, more intuitive, direct and heartfelt resonance. Sure, this has partly to do with all the grappling and research that I have engaged in when translating a text, but it is also simply *how it is*. The Dharma hits home more strongly when I engage with it in my own language. Both the Buddha and Sangharakshita seem to have understood this.

We need to learn the Dharma in our own language

In his book *What is the Dharma?* Sangharakshita says of the Buddha:

”For the same reason he insisted that his teaching should be made available to people in their own language. One day two disciples of his who were of Brahmin birth and ‘of fine cultivated language and fine eloquent speech’ came to the Buddha and requested permission to put his words into Vedic, the exclusively brahmanical language out of which Sanskrit later developed. But the Buddha refused to allow this. People were to learn the Dharma *in their own language or dialect* [my emphasis]. This principle has been followed throughout Buddhist history. There is no one sacred language. When the Buddha’s teaching went to Tibet, the scriptures were all translated into Tibetan. When it went to China, they were translated into Chinese. In fact, wherever Buddhism went it gave a stimulus to the local language and literature. The basic idea is that the Dharma is to be shared with everybody in a way that they can understand. Some religions have a priestly class with a sacred language and in this way knowledge of the scriptures is confined to a small circle of people, but the Buddha insisted that his teaching should be spread as widely as possible, in as many ways as possible. This is what is meant by that teaching being *svākkhāto* – ‘well-communicated’.”²

The basic idea is that the Dharma is to be shared with everybody in a way that they can understand.

I have heard many people say that when they can hear, read and study the Dharma in their own language it touches their hearts more and goes deeper in their being. The teaching produces deeper resonances within them, that a second language often doesn’t do, in some ways maybe can’t do. And they are able to more freely explore the relevance and how to practise the Dharma in their everyday lives. There is a growing number of

² Sangharakshita, [Complete Works, volume 3](#), *What is the Dharma?*, Introduction.

recorded testimonies to this effect, in video format. (You can **listen to Daniela**, Essen, Germany, share her experience: [link](#).)

Recently I heard Satyanita, a young Swedish Order member, who speaks English fluently, say (in Swedish of course): *“If there is a Dharma book in Swedish, why read it in English?”*

That is obvious, isn’t it? And I’m sure that many people can resonate with her words.

But before I finish this article I’d like to address an issue that is both a blessing and a (concealed) stumbling block (or difficulty), and this is what can be called an ‘anglo-centrism’ within Triratna, and also within the world at large. By that I mean that English is the dominant language and on the whole it’s taken for granted that people can understand and speak it. It’s true that many people do understand English fairly well, some indeed very well, but even for them, it’s not their first language. And let us not forget that there are many people for whom it’s not so easy – in fact quite a stumbling block – that the teaching within Triratna is mostly in English. There are many people in the world who understand very little English.

Even though many people understand English quite well they very often experience a gap, or discrepancy, between hearing and understanding intellectually and their own experience (for instance when listening to a Dharma talk or partaking in a discussion). They can easily lose the thread when people speak fast or use difficult words, or very specific cultural references that they are unfamiliar with. This of course varies from person to person. Those for whom English is their first language can easily lose sight of this and they may think: “But he or she or they speak English (or write) so well, what is the problem?”

It is a bit embarrassing and hard to make this point, but we do need to remind you, the native English speakers, how it is for us, for whom English is not our first language.

The fact that so many people do speak and understand English reasonably well is of course a wonderful thing and a blessing. We are very fortunate that Sangharakshita was born in England, and spoke and wrote in English, enabling so many people to have access to his clear and deep understanding of the Dharma. Just imagine if he’d been born in Finland or Poland or the Netherlands, and had spoken the local language. That might of course have meant that many other possibilities had presented themselves, but for communicating the Dharma it wouldn’t have been as effective as English has been. So, yes, it is indeed a blessing.

Our precious founder and teacher Urgyen Sangharakshita was born an Englishman and as we know he was deeply steeped not only in the English language but also in English culture and literature, as well as world culture and literature. I think he knew some Indian languages too; and he explored the meaning of words and used them with great precision. He founded the movement in England amidst mostly young English people, in the 1960’s and 1970’s. It’s important to be aware of these facts and all the conditions that underlie them.

When reading and translating Sangharakshita, I often delight in all the cultural and literary references and on the whole understand the gist of them, but sometimes the references are somewhat remote from my own cultural experience. Bhante's elucidation of the Dharma is very accessible and touches me deeply. He is a skilled and accomplished Dharma Teacher, there's no doubt about that.

I hope you feel stimulated after reading this article and I hope that you now can more clearly understand the need, in fact *the vital importance of translation work*, and the need to support and fund it.

In the next article I will explore some of the challenges (and also joys) of translating the Dharma, especially as taught by Urgyen Sangharakshita.

What has been done – grants given

Below you can see a pie chart and a table showing a summary of the grants that have been given, through the ITTB, to various countries/languages since we more actively started supporting translation initiatives from central resources. The money for the grants have come from the ECA (European Chairs Assembly), Bhante's 90 Birthday appeal and the FutureDharma Fund.

In the next article there will also be more information and background to these figures. I will also go into some of the challenges, like working with idioms, specific cultural references, the question of faithfulness in translation, and many more.

With metta, Viryabodhi

TOTAL FUNDING: 2012-2023

