

The Uses of Philology: A Case Study in Popularising Buddhism

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Buddhism has a presence in the public discourse of the ‘Western world’, for instance in the UK. It is a paradoxical presence — powerful in a way, but confused and confusing. This paper offers an illustrative case. A forthcoming contribution will analyse it further and suggest wider conclusions.

The context is two-fold. First, there is an attempt to popularise a general-purpose, non-denominational version of Buddhism for secular Westerners. Then, people in and around the UK policy establishment, who wish to address the fundamental challenges facing British society, are making use of the popularisers’ work.

Against this background, the paper focuses on a passage purportedly translated from the Pali. It shows the actual import of the passage and contrasts this with the way it has been represented. From a scholarly perspective, the attempt at popularisation is unsound; but it has had a significant impact.

Introduction

This paper examines a prominent author’s misunderstanding and mistranslation of some Pali. The case is quite striking, but that is insufficient reason to mention it; the intention is certainly not to embarrass the author. The story highlights the importance of rigour, and the danger of assuming that meditative experience

can trump philology, but it also merits consideration for another reason entirely. This author's presentation of the Ariyapariyesanā sutta has had a remarkable after-life. It figures prominently in a major study¹, issued by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in December 2014, on the need to reframe our society's attempt to address long-term challenges.

Why did this unusual version of the Buddha's message appeal? Why should both the author and the RSA wish to present it as coming from the Buddha, rather than simply attributing it, as they also do, to Heidegger and others? Upon such points, readers are for the moment invited to form their own opinions. This paper just presents the translation offered and the use made of it. It is hoped later to offer an analysis of this episode's significance for Buddhism in the West.

I. Reframing our challenges

1) Changing values

In September 2010, some major UK NGOs combined to produce a landmark report: *Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values*.² It said that the participating organisations and others like them are failing.

The implication, never too directly stated, was that our current social order is based on untenable assumptions — if we are to escape the worst consequences of climate change and global inequity, economic and social systems must change significantly. But the focus was not on the problems, nor even on the change needed. It was on the NGOs' attempts to trigger such change.

They have encouraged the public to behave differently. They have campaigned in this vein for years, with some success. Yet there is little sign of systemic change. Evidently, the NGOs have come up against opposition. One might conclude that the strategy of driving change from the bottom up will not work, at least not by itself. Instead, *Common Cause* framed the problem in marketing terms.

It was not enough, the argument went, to explain to people the negative consequences of particular behaviours. The time had come for a broader level of campaigning, which would aim for attitudinal and cognitive shifts. People needed — and were ready for — a change in values; NGOs and others must precipitate it.

¹Rowson 2014

²Crompton 2010

This would alter consumer behaviour. That would then in turn force change in markets, and hence in society.

2) Changing ourselves

The RSA, an independent body with influence on UK public policy, took up the *Common Cause* challenge. A series of RSA projects, events and documents sought to highlight ideas and practices likely to facilitate necessary changes in values and hence behaviour.

This activity came under the RSA's 'Social Brain³ project':

The notion of a rational individual who makes decisions consciously, consistently and independently is, at best, a very partial account of who we are. ... [T]he Social Brain project has sought to make theories of human nature more accurate ... [and] explicit, ... [and so ultimately to] ... support personal development and wellbeing, inform social and educational practice and improve financial and environmental behaviour.⁴

In other words:

- Decision-makers and the public at large have tended to assume that, to cope with major challenges, we just need intellect and willpower. But no, we may understand the need for change, and want it to happen, and yet may remain paralysed. Take the climate. In *The Seven Dimensions of Climate Change*, produced with the Climate Outreach & Information Network (COIN), the RSA asks “*why the calls to action are not being heeded*” and concludes that this is a problem of:

³Cf. Dunbar (2009) “species that have pairbonded mating systems [have] the largest brains. ... [A]nthropoid primates may have generalized the bonding processes that characterize monogamous pairbonds...” So being clever is all about getting on with other people, and about being somebody they want to get on with. It is not about manipulating numbers.

⁴Rowson, Kálmán Mezey & Dellot (2012) p 2

'... stealth denial' — ... the majority of those who understand the problem intellectually don't live as though they do'⁵.

- If action is required, we have assumed that experts must collect data and analyse it. But no, the change we need now must involve everyone. If, as a society, we are failing to adapt, that means we have to change *ourselves*. As the RSA paper *Beyond the Big Society* puts it:

*[A]dults vary developmentally, just as children do... [T]hat matters. [It is necessary to] promote adult development.*⁶

For a nation to do well, individual citizens must be doing well — and not just in terms of performance. Individuals must be doing well *in themselves* — behaving in ways that make sense to them, working on themselves and getting wiser.

Government has been thinking on similar lines. The Cabinet Secretary and the Director of the Institute for Government put it this way:

*Many of the biggest policy challenges we are now facing ... will only be resolved if we are successful in persuading people to change ... lifestyles ...*⁷

This was in their introduction to an influential Cabinet Office Paper called *Mindspace: Influencing Behaviour through Public Policy*. Which said:

[T]here are two ways of thinking about changing behaviour. The first is based on influencing what people consciously think about. ... [This is] the 'rational' or 'cognitive' model. ...

⁵Rowson & Corner (2015) p 4

⁶Rowson, Kálmán Mezey & Dellot (2012) p 6

⁷Dolan, Hallsworth, Halpern, King & Vlaev (2010) p 4

*The contrasting model ... shifts the focus of attention away from facts and information, and towards altering the context within which people act.*⁸

3) Spirituality

Last year, in a dense paper entitled ‘*Spiritualise*’, the RSA took the argument significantly further.⁹ Again, it is necessary to distill the meaning from a document which aims to satisfy diverse constituencies. But the thrust is clear.

Yes, values must change. Yes, everyone, policymakers and population alike, must stop pretending that we are supposed to be rational, detached and analytic, and that everything will be alright if we focus on that. Only, how are we to wean ourselves off spurious rationalism? We will need to replace it. If we are going away from *homo oeconomicus*, what are we heading towards?

Answer: spirituality. To flesh out this imprecise term, the RSA document piles up citations from experts in diverse fields and eagerly deploys fashionable tropes¹⁰ — all very defensive. Something is being said that is difficult to say, presumably about a dominant ideology which we need to undermine.

The RSA wants to move us all away from positivism, scientism, reductionism, naïve realism, travesties of neo-liberal economics, crude utilitarianism with shades of social Darwinism, and so on. But it also seeks to maintain good relations with power centres and not to give public offence. So it does not say too directly that we as a society are wedded to non-viable assumptions. The line is, instead, that we are failing to recognise some attractive, alternative assumptions.

Thus ‘spirituality’ is basically anything that is incompatible with positivism etc. This is the label of choice because:

*many if not most people appear to self-identify as being in some way ‘spiritual.’*¹¹

⁸Ibid p14

⁹Rowson 2014

¹⁰The policy establishment has lately been concerned with spirituality in a different context. Since the London bombings (‘7/7’), efforts have been made to engage the Muslim population. Interfaith dialogue has been a policy priority. At the same time, a strident ‘new Atheism’ has raised its voice — and efforts have been made to include this strand of opinion too in the dialogue. The RSA’s discussion of spirituality evidently draws on this diffuse ‘interfaith’ discourse.

¹¹Rowson (2014) p6

Such people are also doubtless likely to recognise the fundamental problem that:

*what passes for everyday consciousness begins to look like a low-level psychopathology.*¹²

So any responses to that problem may usefully be classified under spirituality. We can infer at least three constituencies to which this rhetoric is addressed.

1. Power-holders and their staff may tend to uphold the very ideology that is to be undermined, but it is vital to bring them along somehow.
2. So it is helpful to get support from other established authorities, ranging from neuroscientists to the CofE.
3. Then, among the general public, many are open to the pattern of thinking that is being promoted here. This is the most important constituency. Such ‘spiritual’ people should be ‘early adopters’ of necessary changes in values and behaviour.

II. The uses of ‘Buddhism’

1) A useful cipher

Spiritualise espouses a loose universalism that seems to come out of the UK interfaith environment. That environment is overwhelmingly Abrahamic, so the document offers propositions and pronouncements that make little or no sense in a Buddhist context. Yet it invokes Buddhism, regularly and insistently.

There is evidently support for Buddhism — it is to be included, prominently. But it is to be understood as a *philosophia perennis*, reasonable and undogmatic — a *bona fide* religion that nonetheless somehow lacks the associated disadvantages.

¹²Ibid p7

Like Esperanto, the supposedly inclusive interfaith language reflects its origins in the Western half of Eurasia — but that is not considered. Instead, it seems to be assumed that if you abstract the underlying characteristics of religions you will reach some sort of quasi-Chomskian universal grammar of spirituality, with which Buddhism must necessarily accord. Thus, a Buddhist author is referenced in relation to “*the inherent fragility and virtuality of ... a deluded self, scrambling to make itself real*” and the need to “*work towards its ... transcendence*” — and this transcendence is then said to lead to the ‘Soul’¹³.

2) Ground and Place

The RSA document is in 4 sections: Context, Analysis, Life-Lessons and Social Implications, roughly. The first section ends with a piece entitled *The heart of the spiritual – it’s about our ‘ground’ not our ‘place’*; the second section is headed *In search of our spiritual ‘ground’ — what are we*; the third is *Living from our ground not our place*. The Ground/Place metaphor is therefore central.

It starts with a distinction between three types of spirituality — religious, non-religious and anti-religious (‘secular’). This leads to the question:

Do these three perspectives on spirituality share touchstones...?

Yes, they do:

What they seem to share ...is the importance of our ‘ground’, rather than our ‘place’. This distinction stems from Buddhism, but it can also be inferred in existential and phenomenological thought, particularly Tillich.... And the distinction is evident in Heidegger’s emphasis on ... the lived experience of being human... [Our ‘ground’ consists in] the most basic facts of our existence: that we are here at all, that we exist in and through this body that somehow breathes, that we build selves through and for others, that we’re a highly improbable part of an unfathomable whole, and of course, that we will inevitably die. Another way to characterise the relevance of our ground comes from the psychotherapist Mark Epstein who refers to

¹³Ibid p6 The reference is to David Loy’s *A Buddhist History of the West*, although Christopher Lasch, quite different and free from any Buddhist influence, is mentioned in the same footnote.

*the spiritual as 'anything that takes us beyond the personality.'*¹⁴

3) The Passage

Deep and hard

Spiritualise quotes the Buddha as saying:

*It is hard for people who love, delight and revel in their place to see this ground*¹⁵

Then it offers an explanation from Stephen Batchelor.

The quotation is difficult to identify. It made no sense to me, who have been reading the Pali canon these 50 years or so.

Batchelor's book yielded a fuller version:

*This Dhamma I have reached is deep, hard to see, difficult to awaken to, quiet and excellent, not confined by thought, subtle, sensed by the wise. But people love their place: they delight and revel in their place. It is hard for people who love, delight and revel in their place to see this ground: this conditionality, conditioned arising*¹⁶.

This clearly derives from a famous passage in the Ariyapariyesanāsutta of the Majjhima Nikāya¹⁷.

The philological standard

But Batchelor's partial translation (it stops in the middle of a sentence) is

¹⁴Ibid p 25. Mark Epstein, incidentally, also known as a populariser of Buddhism, is connected with Stephen Batchelor, for instance via the Insight Meditation Society in Barre Massachusetts.

¹⁵Ibid p 26

¹⁶Batchelor (2010) Ch 10 p 178

¹⁷#26 of the Majjhimanikāya, page 167 of the PTS edition:

Adhigato kho me ayaṃ dhammo gambhīro duddaso duranubodho santo paṇīto atakkāvacaro nipuṇo paṇḍitavedanīyo. Ālayarāmā kho paṇāyaṃ pajā ālayaratā ālayasammuditā. Ālayarāmāya kho pana pajāya ālayaratāya ālayasammuditāya duddasaṃ idam ṭhānaṃ yadidaṃ idappaccayatā paṭiccasamuppādo, idam-pi kho ṭhānaṃ duddasaṃ yadidaṃ sabbasaṅkhārasamatho sabbūpadhipatiṇissaggo taṇhakkhayo virāgo nirodho nibbānaṃ.

idiosyncratic. For Pali scholars, whether from the academy or from monastic learning institutions, have always understood the passage as a powerful but unexceptional presentation of attachment and non-attachment. Thus:

- Thanissaro Bhikkhu offers a standard view of the text:

This Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, peaceful, refined, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this generation delights in attachment, is excited by attachment, enjoys attachment. For a generation delighting in attachment, excited by attachment, enjoying attachment, this/that conditionality & dependent co-arising are hard to see. This state, too, is hard to see: the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.¹⁸

- Soma Thera's version is much the same:

The truth I have come at is deep, hard to meet with, hard to be awakened to, peaceful, sublime, outside the scope of speculation, subtle, and to be known by the wise. This generation, however, likes attachment, is gladdened by attachment, and delights in attachment. For this generation liking attachment, gladdened by attachment, delighting in attachment, it is hard to meet with this fact, namely, definite conditionality, dependent origination; this too, is a fact hard to meet with, namely the quiescence of all formations, the relinquishing of all essential support, the exhaustion of craving, unstaining, ceasing, extinction.¹⁹

¹⁸<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.026.than.html>

¹⁹<http://www.bps.lk/olib/bl/bl001.pdf>

Both have ‘attachment’ where Batchelor uses ‘place’. This is the word *ālaya*. *Ālaya* is a noun formed by combining a verbal root with a prefix:

- The verbal root is *lī/līyati* meaning ‘cling’ / ‘stick’ / ‘adhere’ / ‘hang on’

The prefix is *ā*, meaning ‘to’ or ‘from’.

So *Ālaya* is ‘clinging on’.

- It can be used for ‘what one clings onto’ — for instance a bird’s roosting-place, or more generally some sort of house or home. This is what *ālaya* means when it refers to something concrete²⁰.
- But otherwise, normally, there is no sense of ‘abode’ or whatever. Instead, the word just means ‘clinging’. Thus, since *gilāna* means ‘sick’, *gilānālaya* means ‘hypochondriac’ — clinging on to being sick.
- The term is commonly used when speaking of the *Dhamma*. Here, *ālaya* carries no overtones of a physical location or of metaphors derived therefrom. A typical usage would be *kāmālaya*: ‘clinging on to sensual gratification’.

Terms of art

So Batchelor’s ‘translation’ (*they delight and revel in their place*) is not well supported. But he expands on it at length:

...people are blinded to the fundamental contingency of their existence by attachment to their place. One’s place is that to which one is most strongly bound. It is the foundation on which the entire edifice of one’s identity is built. It is formed through identification

²⁰The usage is familiar to us in the word *Himālaya*, conventionally ‘abode of snow’.

with a physical location and social position, by one's religious and political beliefs, through that instinctive conviction of being a solitary ego. One's place is where one stands, and whence one takes a stand against everything that seems to challenge what is "mine." This stance is your posture vis-à-vis the world: it encompasses everything that lies on this side of the line that separates "you" from "me." Delight in it creates a sense of being fixed and secure in the midst of an existence that is anything but fixed and secure. Loss of it, one fears, would mean that everything one cherishes would be overwhelmed by chaos, meaninglessness, or madness.²¹

The writer seems to have taken the theme of attachment and started to play with it. He free-associates about things that people get attached to these days.

Some of this strikes a chord: *a sense of being fixed and secure in the midst of an existence that is anything but fixed and secure.* That sounds Buddhist, certainly.

But then he goes on to say:

*Gotama's quest led him to abandon everything to do with his place — his king, his homeland, his social standing, his position in the family, his beliefs, his conviction of being a self in charge of a body and mind— but it did not result in psychotic collapse. For in relinquishing his place (*ālaya*), he arrived at a ground (*ṭṭhāna*). But this ground is quite unlike the seemingly solid ground of a place. It is the contingent, transient, ambiguous, unpredictable, fascinating, and terrifying ground called "life." Life is a groundless ground: no sooner does it appear, than it disappears, only to renew itself, then immediately break up and vanish again. It pours forth endlessly, like the river of Heraclitus into which one cannot step twice. If you try to grasp it, it slips away between your fingers.²²*

Let us start with *ālaya*. The implication seems to be that this is not just about becoming attached. It is, rather, a technical term for a certain type of thing that we get attached to. The word apparently has a range of meanings to do with e.g. social standing and sense of self.

²¹Batchelor op. cit. p 179

²²Ibid

It immediately struck me that no one with formal training in Pali, whether monastic or academic, could make any sense of that proposition. That impression has been confirmed.

In principle, of course, social standing and sense of self would be among the things a person clings on to. But there does not seem to be a single instance in the literature where the word *ālaya* is actually used to make that point, or anything like it.

The other Pāli word (*ṭṭhāna*) is, perhaps, even more interesting. This is presented as if it were a key term, which expresses the fundamental reality of life, as opposed to the illusory quasi-reality *ālaya*.

But it is the most common-or-garden of words, *ṭhāna*.²³ This is not a weighty, doctrinal term at all. It is the simplest possible noun that can be derived from the extremely common verbal root *ṭhā/tiṭṭhati*, meaning ‘stand’ or ‘subsist’.

It is used to mean a place, but most usages are more abstract, e.g. *ṭhāna* means:

- a condition or state, so that *lahu* ‘light’ combines with *ṭhāna* to give *lahuṭṭhāna* ‘lightness’; or
- a basis or opportunity, so that *pamāda* ‘intoxication’ plus *ṭhāna* gives *pamādaṭṭhāna* ‘an occasion’ for intoxication.

Accordingly, one common expression is *ṭhānaṃ etaṃ vijjati*: “this situation occurs”, i.e. “it can happen that...”

In the passage cited, therefore, the word *ṭhāna* barely carries any meaning of its own. It is more of a placeholder — hence the standard translations, ‘state’ and ‘fact’.

Reflections

Moreover, across the long and diverse history of Buddhist tradition there has been resistance to using words like ‘ground’ to put a label on ultimate reality. Pali Buddhism in particular is notoriously apophatic. The focus is on what is not so, what is not helpful, what is illusory and painful. The positive is more or less unstated: you get to it by focusing on the negatives and clearing them away.

²³The form *ṭṭhāna* sometimes arises when this is combined with another word.

Later iterations of the tradition start to offer more positive expressions, sometimes indeed give them pride of place. *Bodhicitta* ‘Enlightenment-mind’ would be an example. But even here, the positive term emerges like a sculpture under the chisel. You start with *śūnyatā* ‘emptiness’ and get to *bodhicitta* from there.

Some traditional teachers in good standing, Tibetan or East Asian for instance, may expatiate on absolute reality. But to understand the message they are transmitting, we need to see the cultural context, surely. We need to look at the forms of words they are using, in their language, and at how those words came down to them from their predecessors. When we do so, we tend to notice that, generally speaking, *bodhicitta* starts with *śūnyatā*.

Buddhists likewise have tended to avoid paradoxical formulations that simultaneously mystify and exalt. It is true that paradoxes like ‘the sound of one hand clapping’ are used — they suggest that we get locked into our conceptual apparatus and prompt us to break out. But such formulations aim, precisely, to counteract the impulse to verbalise transformative experience. They mock that impulse, almost.

It is difficult to see expressions like ‘groundless ground’ in the same way. Such *façons de parler* may seem to offer a useful way round conceptual limitations while suggesting impenetrable secrets, but they tend to take on a life of their own. Buddhists have generally been very wary about that sort of thing.

Inferences

What are we to make of this story? It might at first seem a little depressing. It is good that British people are interested in and attracted to Buddhism — so much so, indeed, that this current of opinion constitutes a significant point of reference in policy debates. But how does Buddhism figure in the public arena? What images are selling today? It seems that sometimes you can’t beat a dollop of existentialism lite.

This might suggest that 150 years of Buddhist Studies may have had limited impact. There is demand for general-purpose presentations of Buddhism in contemporary terms, but the supply is of uneven quality, and the public seems relatively indiscriminating.

I prefer not to take that depressing view, but instead simply to acknowledge that it is difficult to breathe life into the spare formulations of the Pali canon — to make the material *work* for a mass audience. People are keen on it but have

trouble getting their minds around it. There is something about Buddhism that people can recognise and appreciate, and at the same time it is difficult to make that something apparent.

So perhaps there is a more interesting point here. Think about what makes it difficult to present Buddhism in a way that people can latch onto. Then think what makes Buddhism interesting and attractive. Are the two distinct? Not necessarily!

Perhaps what is attractive is precisely what is hard to express. Perhaps the Buddhist approach undercuts habits of language and thought deeply engrained in our culture, and perhaps we *need* to undercut them — and perhaps people recognise that need.

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