

## The Vitality of the Knowledge of Sanskrit For Buddhism in Southeast Asia\*

Mr. Sanit Sinak

Mahamakut Buddhist University Salaya,  
Nakhonpathom, THAILAND  
Corresponding Author, E-mail: sanitsinak@gmail.com

### Abstract

Although Pāli was the main language of the southern Buddhist, the knowledge of Sanskrit is necessary to help more understanding Buddhism. As knowing for long time, the southern Buddhism, Theravāda, recorded the Buddha's teachings in Pāli, while the northern, Mahāyāna recorded in Sanskrit language. Studying Sanskrit has taken the important role in many countries which accepted the teachings of Theravāda Buddhism along with Pāli.

To understand the teachings of the Lord Buddha, we need to study the languages which has been recorded them in religious texts, not only Pāli but Sanskrit also. In our present time, difficulty of language makes trouble for people and they turned away. In Southeast Asia, many countries accepted the Buddha's teachings as the religion of mostly people. Therefore, to understanding and to practicing the Buddhism need ability of the languages. Moreover, the relation between Pāli and Sanskrit is very close in many aspects. So the knowledge of Sanskrit is very important to study Buddhism, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna. The Buddhist monks who have important role to spread and protect the right teachings in this global society more need to study and understand the religious languages.

Furthermore, there are many mistakes in interpretation of Buddhist virtues by the person who has not enough knowledge of Pāli and Sanskrit. In the current paper, the objectives are to study about the necessity of Sanskrit for Buddhism in Southeast Asia and Vietnam. to present the significant of knowledge of both Pāli and Sanskrit which being used to understand the Buddhism of the people in this region.

**Keywords:** Sanskrit, Buddhism and Southeast Asia

## Introduction

The major language of Buddhism has been known as Pāli which is used in order to record the Buddha's speech in the form of Buddhist Cannon, *Tripitaka*, in the main of Theravāda School. Those who want to understand Buddhism have to study the language at first as A. K. Wader said "the study of early Buddhism will always be the objective of the majority of those who take up Pāli." Although Pāli is regarded as language of Buddhism, especially Southern Buddhism, but in ancient India at the time of the Lord Buddha not only single language was spoken by people. The language being supported as *lingua franca* of Indo-Aryan in the old period is the 'Sanskrit'.

In the aspect of history of the language, this is not possible to miss Sir William Jones's lecture in Calcutta to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal on February 2, 1786:

*"The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologist could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists: there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothic and the Celtic, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family."*

The Sanskrit is not only name of the language it is also the vast field of many branches of knowledge consisting of Indian philosophy, religion, art, culture and literature etc. When the Sanskrit was used in the religious and philosophical texts in ancient India so that, they had the very powerful impact to the Indo-Aryan's life and society. According to Aryan Hindu minds, they accepted Sanskrit as the language of god or a divine language (*daivt vāk*) which having been revealed through the mouth of the **R̥ṣi** or seers and it is also called devabhāṣā meaning "Language of the Gods". This is the important reason that religious texts were recorded in Sanskrit. Moreover, Sanskrit indicated of sacredness of messages from the Gods and the knowledge of Sanskrit, following the grammar of Pāṇini,

showed the great ability of those. So the various branches of sciences were produced through Sanskrit by those scholars. In the Mahābhārata, the great epic of India, there is one stanza that shows the greatness and vastness of Sanskrit as;

*dharme hyārthe ca kāme ca mokse ca bharatarṣabha/yadihāsti tadanyatra yannehāsti na tat kvacit //*

All about dharma artha kāma and mokṣa are found in the Mahābhārata. If there are not found in it, neither also in any others.

The important role of Sanskrit spreads over mostly in northwestern parts of India. As a language of Indo-Aryan at the period of the Vedic till the classical, the Sanskrit took the major impact to society, culture and religion also. It seems scholars must know Sanskrit for showing their ability of language talent. Also in the texts of Buddhism, we have the famous passage being quoted from Cūḷavagga, Khuddakavattthukkhandhaka indicating that Buddhist monks tried to give the Lord Buddha's speech in Sanskrit but not be allowed by The Lord Buddha.' I quoted it from Pāli as:

*Tena kho pana samayena yameḷakekuṭṭa nāma bhikkhūdve bhatikā honti brāhmaṇajātikā kalyāṇavāca kalyāṇavākkaraṇā. Te yena bhagavā tenupasaṅkamimsu, upasaṅkamitvābhagavantam abhivādetvā ekamantam nistimsu. Ekamantaṃ nisinnākho te bhikkha bhagavantaṃetadavocuṃ "eta- rahi, bhante, bhikkhūnanānāmā nānāgottā nānājaccā nānākulā pabbajitā. Te sakāya niruttīyā buddhavacanaṃ dūsentī. Handa mayaṃ, bhante, buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā"ti. Vigarahi buddho bhagavā... "kathanhi nāma tumhe, moghapurisā, evaṃ vakkhatha 'handa mayaṃ, bhante, buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā'ti. Netam, moghapurisā, appasannānaṃ vā pasādāya. vigarahitvā... dhammiṃ kathaṃ katvā bhikkhūāmantesi "na, bhik- khave, buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropetabbaṃ. Yo āropeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassa. Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, sakāya niruttīyā buddhavacanaṃ pariyāpuṇitu"nti.*

"Now at that time Yamelu and Tekula were the names of two monks who were brothers, Brahmans by birth, with lovely voices, with lovely enunciation. They approached the Lord; having approached, having greeted the Lord, they sat down at a respectful distance. As they were sitting down at a respectful distance, these monks spoke thus to the Lord; "At present, Lord, monks of various names, various clans, various social

strata have gone forth from various families; these corrupt the speech of the Awakened One in using his own dialect. Now we, Lord, give speech of the Awakened One in metrical form." The Awakened One, the Lord One rebuked them, saying: "How can you, foolish men, speak thus: 'Now we, Lord, give the speech of the Awakened One in metrical form'? It is not, foolish men, for pleasing those who are not yet pleased.? And having rebuked them, having given reasoned talk; addressed the monks, saying: "Monks, the speech of the Awakened One should not be given in metrical form. Whoever should so give it, there is an offence of wrong-doing. I allow you, monks, to learn the speech of the Awakened One according to his own dialect.

Even though The Lord Buddha has rebuked the Buddhist monks to give the speech of Him in metrical form, but it seem to be the vitality of Sanskrit language which in the later period, after the Mahānirvāṇa (the great divine liberation or transcendence) of the Lord, the Buddhists have tried to compose and adopt the Buddha's speech to Sanskrit.

The adoption of Sanskrit by the Buddhists made the field of Sanskrit literature is wider. We may distinguish characters of Sanskrit which the Buddhists used by various methods as T. Burrow<sup>6</sup> noted that firstly, Mixed Sanskrit or Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit which was used in the Mahāsaṅghika School by mixing the original Prakrit with Sanskrit. The half-Sanskrit words appear by Sanskritisation but the Prakrit grammar is retained. It may be assumed that such a language was actually employed by those who wished to employ the superior Sanskrit language but were not able to follow its grammar. The second character is the language of Sarvāstivādins (the north-west) School which adopted proper Sanskrit from an early period by translation the canonical works into Sanskrit. The third is the works of same School which is not translation but composition which were at the later period than the canonical literature. The last character is the use of pure classical Sanskrit, in generally, associated with the characteristics of the Kāvya style, and is seen in the works of Aśvaghoṣa and his successors. Such works are distinguished from other works of classical Sanskrit literature only by the use of Buddhist technical terms.

In addition, I have my own opinion that Buddhist monks in the period of Kuṣāṇa dynasty which adopted Sanskrit as *lingua franca* came

*from Brahmins family* and lived in the environment of Sanskrit language so that is not to be surprised that in this period there are a lot of Buddhist Sanskrit texts were produced.

Buddhism in Southeast Asia including two main sects: Mahāyāna and Theravāda, by historical aspect, Mahāyāna Buddhism had a prominent position over the region, but nowadays many countries accept the Theravāda which can be divided by each country as a Theravāda Buddhist majority are in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Vietnam continues to have Mahayāna majority due to Chinese influence. Indonesia was Mahayana Buddhist since the time of the Śailendra and Srivijaya empires, but now Mahāyāna Buddhism in Indonesia is now largely practiced by the Chinese diaspora, as in Singapore and Malaysia.

At present, there are Buddhist texts were composed in Sanskrit by adopting many types of language characters as T. Burrow noted above even new version of composition is Sanskrit. Furthermore Sanskrit also has influence on other languages in Indo-European family as English speaking world a lot of commonly used Buddhist terms are Sanskrit like saṃsāra, dharma and nirvāṇa, though of course translations in some cases are more common like "sentient being" for sattva, Use of Sanskrit terms for precision to understand the meaning of technical terms. However, Sanskrit as a language used to convey Buddhadharma was later development in Buddhist history.

However, to study Sanskrit is very difficult for capacity of people in our present day but for sure it is no waste afford definitely, as na corahāryaṃ na ca rājahāryaṃ na bhrātṛbhājyaṃ na ca bhārakāri | vyaye kṛte vardhata eva nityaṃ vidyādhanam sarvadhanapradhā | nam //

It cannot be stolen by thieves, nor can it be taken away by kings, nor can be divided among brothers, nor cause a load on your shoulders. If being spent, it indeed always keeps growing. The wealth of knowledge is the most superior of all wealth.

The knowledge of Sanskrit is very necessary for studying and understanding Buddhism as follows "Within Indian Buddhism, there are at least 600 Mahayana Buddhist literary compositions (sutras) that have survived in the languages of Sanskrit, Chinese or Tibetan. A near-complete Mahayana Buddhist Canon has survived in Chinese, but all of

these translated texts were originally revealed in a Sanskrit language. This Mahayana Buddhist Canon, recognized as a *vaipulyapitaka* in South Asia, contains texts that provide invaluable insight into major early Buddhist traditions. Some texts were transmitted in a language classified as Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, while other texts use classical Sanskrit, both of which are no longer spoken. The project's Scope encompasses both languages, preserving this rich cultural and linguistic heritage.

"Sanskrit is a very important language with which to comprehend the canon of Buddhism, as several schools of Buddhism derive their authority from Sanskrit texts. Mahayana Buddhist traditions in places such as China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Tibet, Bhutan, India, and Nepal were founded on translations of original Sanskrit texts, and Sanskrit texts are also important in Tantric Buddhist traditions. When there is a question about meaning, interpretation, or authenticity in regards to Buddhist texts in translation, these issues often can be resolved only by consulting the original Sanskrit texts"

But the languages of mostly in the region of Southeast Asia have very different structure and grammar from Sanskrit especially in Thailand, although there are many Sanskrit words in Thai language but usage and grammar are absolutely different. So studying Sanskrit which is provided only in university level and furthermore it has a lack of students who can pay time of their lives to study a somewhat very old and hard. Also in my university, **Mahamakut Buddhist University**, there are only a few Sanskrit students a year. At the end of this paper I want to quote the sentence of the renowned historian and author, William Cooke Taylor acknowledges that *"To acquire the mastery of this language is almost a labour of a life; its literature seems exhaustless"*.<sup>10</sup>

## References

Basham, A. L. **The Wonder That Was India**. 24<sup>th</sup> Ed. Calcutta: Rupa & co, 1994  
 Briggs, Rick. "Power of Sanskrit" in **Sanskrit in AI Magazine**. [2017 July 5] Available from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/31774203/NASA-Sanskrit-Report>, 1985

- Burrow, T. *The Sanskrit Language*. London: Faber and Faber, 1955, p. 61.
- Edgerton, F. **Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary**  
**Volume I: Grammar**. Reprinted. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.  
1985.
- Geiger, Wilhelm. **Pali Literature and Language**. English Translation by  
Batakrisna Gohsh. Delh: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.  
1996.
- Horner, I. B. **The Book of the Discipline**. Oxford: The Pali Text Society,  
1997 p 193-194
- Davids, T.W. Rhys and Oldenberg, Hermann. **Sacred Books of the East**.  
**Vol. 20 Vinaya Texts Part ii: the Kullavagga**. iv-xii. Delhi:  
Motilal Banarsidass, 1885. p 150-151 Nikul Joshi "Sanskrit" [2017  
July 4] Available from: <http://www.ancient.eu/Sanskrit/>
- Wader, A. K. **Introduction to Pali**. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: The Pali Text Society,  
1974. <http://www.dsbproject.org/>