

THE FEATHERS OF THE ARROW

Why hardly anyone understands what the Buddha meant · On scholars' language, forest monks and translating for meaning

Daniel Schwörer · Winterthur, September 2026

THE MAN WITH THE ARROW

The Buddha tells of a man who has been struck by a poisoned arrow. His friends fetch a surgeon. But the man will not have the arrow drawn until he knows who shot it, what wood the shaft was carved from, which bird gave the feathers and what the bowstring was twisted from. He would die, says the Buddha, and all of this would still be unknown to him ⁽¹⁾.

I know of no more exact description of what has happened to the teaching in the West. We have learned to identify the feathers of the arrow. We can derive the root of a Pali word, name its Sanskrit parallel and report three schools of opinion on its meaning. Except that, in all of this, nobody has pulled the arrow out.

WHO MADE THE WORDS

Almost the entire vocabulary in which the West speaks about the teaching of the Buddha was fixed within some seventy years by a small circle of philologists. In 1881 Thomas William Rhys Davids founded the Pali Text Society in London. He had been a British colonial official in Ceylon and had first met Pali when, sitting as a judge, he was handed a document in that language as evidence. By his death in 1922 the Society had published 64 texts in 94 volumes, more than 26,000 pages. Then came the Pali-English Dictionary of 1921 to 1925, for which he had collected material for forty years and which to this day lies on every translator's desk.

On the German side, Karl Eugen Neumann in Vienna translated the Middle Length Discourses (published 1896 to 1902) and the Long Discourses (1907 to 1918, the last volume after his death). Anton Gueth of Wiesbaden, ordained in Burma in 1904 as Nyanatiloka, translated the Numerical Discourses and the Visuddhimagga and compiled, around 1950, the Buddhist Dictionary, which is still regarded as the yardstick in the German-speaking world and is widely used in English as well.

I say this without disrespect. These men secured manuscripts, edited texts and opened up an entire literature, and Nyanatiloka was a monk for more than fifty years. Their task was to secure the texts, and that task they accomplished. It was simply a different task from telling a person what to do on a Monday morning when anger rises in him.

The fault, then, lies less with them than with us. We have taken the working vocabulary of philologists, formed by the rules of word root and grammar, and elevated it to a binding text. Dictionaries, university chairs and habit have turned it to stone. Whoever translates differently today is considered imprecise, although he merely departs from a convention that is not yet a hundred and fifty years old.

WHAT WAS LOST

Four examples, standing for many.

Āyatana is rendered "sense-base". A base is something that lies still and on which something else stands. What is meant is the opposite: the place where eye meets form and ear meets sound, where inside and outside connect so that knowing arises. For that, English has a word every child understands: a bridge. Six sense bridges, and across each of them the world walks into the mind.

Sammā is rendered "right": right speech, right concentration. In today's English the word points in too many directions at once. It means the right hand, a legal right, being in the right, righteous, and it smells of the pulpit. What is meant is: done in such a way that it works. The word for that is "correct". Concentration is correct when presence of mind is there with it. Whoever merely stares is practising wrongly. That needs no commentary.

Saṅkhāra is rendered "formations", in some dictionaries even "kamma-formations". Under the second word everyone may imagine whatever he likes, most often the transmigration of souls, and that is exactly what happens. Yet in the mouth of the forest monks kamma means nothing other than action and its result, cause and effect. And saṅkhāra names a process everyone can observe in himself: the mind repeats feeling and thinking over time, until what it has created in this way looks like a solid world, and like a self that lives in it.

Dukkha is rendered "suffering". The word suggests pain and misfortune, and so the teaching of the Buddha is held in the West to be pessimistic. My teacher explicitly says otherwise: what is meant is not the pain of body and mind, what is meant is that nothing holds. What changes constantly cannot carry weight, and hanging on to it creates tension. I therefore translate with three words which together cover the range of the one: tension, stress and suffering.

The pattern is always the same. Pali names a process, something one does or can observe in oneself. Scholars' English turns it into a thing: formation, attachment, group of existence. But with things there is nothing one can do, one can only define them. So the conversation shifts, unnoticed, from the practice to the concept, and in the end one discusses the origin of the word and no longer the teaching.

THE BUDDHA WARNED AGAINST IT

The remarkable thing is that the tradition itself names this danger, and more than once.

Whoever learns the teaching only in order to debate and to be proved right grasps, in the Buddha's simile, the snake by the tail: it coils back and bites him. In the same discourse stands the simile of the raft. The teaching is for crossing the river, not for carrying about on the far shore ⁽²⁾.

Two monks of brahmin birth asked the Buddha for permission to put his words into the elevated verse language of the learned, so that they would not be corrupted by the dialects. He refused. Everyone was to learn the teaching in his own language ⁽³⁾. Elsewhere he urges his listeners not to insist on the expression of one region and not to override common usage: where people call a vessel a bowl, say bowl, and where they say pot, say pot ⁽⁴⁾.

And in the Siṃsapā grove he took up a handful of leaves and asked the monks which was more, the leaves in his hand or those in the forest. So it was, he said, with what he had known and what he had taught. He had taught only what leads to the goal ⁽⁵⁾.

A teaching that opens itself only to those who have learned Pali or Thai has failed by its own standard.

HOW THE FOREST MONKS SPEAK

I lived in Thailand for sixteen years and heard the Dhamma there not from books but from monks of the forest tradition. They speak differently. My teacher explains dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda), that is, how one thing arises out of another, the heart of the teaching, in half an hour in such a way that a child understands it and can apply it at once. He says: the fish lives in water and does not know water, and whoever lives in suffering does not know suffering. He says, with an image of Buddhada's: cut the vine through in the middle, and at the tip it will bear neither flower nor fruit, and the middle is feeling, the moment in which something pleases or displeases. He says: the real path for walking meditation is the breath, in and out, you need not spread any gravel.

In fairness it must be added that the same ailment lives in Thailand too. There it does not wear the robe of philology but that of the Pali sermon, of ritual and of the keeping of merit accounts. Buddhada distinguished sixty years ago between the language of people and the language of Dhamma, and my teacher says "in the language of the scriptures one would say ..." and translates it into plain words in the same breath. In Thailand, too, the forest tradition is the counter-movement and not the normal case. This is therefore not a failure of the West but a pattern: wherever transmission becomes more important than application, meaning loses itself in form.

WHAT PAYUTTO'S DICTIONARY SHOWS

The clearest evidence comes, of all people, from a scholar. The "Dictionary of Buddhism" by the Venerable P. A. Payutto, the standard work of Thailand and a book I value highly, explains every term twice: in Thai, and with an English equivalent ⁽⁶⁾. In Thai he explains plainly and in images. The āyatana are for him "that which connects so that

knowing arises", in other words a bridge. Sati is "to recollect, to be awake and present, the heart with the task", in other words presence of mind. Saṅkhāra is "that which prepares and shapes", using the word one uses in the kitchen for seasoning a dish. Āsava is "that which pickles the ground of the mind and lets it ferment".

As soon as the same author switches to English, only the vocabulary of 1900 is at his disposal: Kamma-Formations, Five Groups of Existence, Six Sense-Bases, Right Concentration. This is no reproach to him; he gives the internationally customary equivalents so that one can look things up. But it shows where the problem lives. It does not lie with the Thais, and it does not lie with Pali. It lies in the language of translation which the West gave itself a hundred years ago and has not dared to touch since.

FOUR RULES FOR TRANSLATING THE MEANING

I therefore translate the meaning and not the grammar of Pali. So that this does not become a licence for arbitrariness, I keep to four rules which anyone can check.

First: the sentence must contain something one can do or observe. What cannot be applied on a Monday morning is not a usable translation.

Second: verb before noun. Holding on is something I can see in myself; "attachment" is not.

Third: the word in the new language follows what a living teacher of the tradition means and shows by example, not the dictionary entry.

Fourth: the Pali stays beside it in brackets. In this way every scholar can check the correspondence, and whoever does not need it reads past it. The sentence before it must already stand without the bracket.

INVITATION

This is no rejection of scholarship. Without the work of the Pali Text Society and without Nyanatiloka, the texts from which I draw would not exist. It is the request to take their words for what they were: the working terms of an epoch, not revelation. The fourth rule takes nothing from research. It merely adds a level on which the teaching once again does what it was meant to do.

Talks with a great deal of Pali therefore need more editing than others, in today's German as in today's English, so that the meaning becomes as self-explanatory in the new language as it is in the teacher's own speech. That is the work I have set myself.

Pull the arrow out. We can talk about the feathers afterwards.

NOTES

(1) Cūḷamāluṅkya Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 63.

(2) Alagaddūpama Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 22.

(3) Vinaya, Cullavagga V 33 (Vin II 139): "sakāya niruttiyā". Buddhaghosa's commentary reads the passage differently, namely as the Buddha's own language; the refusal of the scholars' language is not affected by this.

(4) Araṇavibhaṅga Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 139.

(5) Siṃsapā Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.31.

(6) Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto), พจนานุกรมพุทธศาสตร์ ฉบับประมวลธรรม / Dictionary of Buddhism; the explanations quoted are found under the entries [276] āyatana, [281] bojjhaṅga, [120] saṅkhāra, [135] āsava, [340] paṭiccasamuppāda.

Dates of lives and works: Pali Text Society (founded 1881), T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922), Pali-English Dictionary (1921–1925), K. E. Neumann (1865–1915), Nyanatiloka (1878–1957). Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "ภาษาคน ภาษาธรรม" (Language of People, Language of Dhamma), lecture at Suan Mokkh, Chaiya, 8 October 1966.

This English version follows the German original, «Die Federn des Pfeils». The first example has been adapted: the German text discusses «Sammlung» for samādhi, a problem English does not have.