

Commentary on Translation and Interpretation of Dhamma & Vinaya

By Pittaya Wong (M.A. in Translation)

5 May 2016

www.meditation101.org

Buddhist scholars have argued for a lengthy period of time on many doctrinal issues such as the selfhood (*atta*) and non-selfhood (*anatta*) of the Nirvana. Scriptural evidences have been quoted to convince each other; however, it seems that the unrest criticism on selfhood and non-selfhood of the Nirvana can be linguistically misleading due to the improper and persuasive ‘translation’ and/or ‘interpretation’ of the Pali cannon in order to support the translators’ ideas.

With translation science, we can gain better in-depth understanding about problems from translation and interpretation of Pali statement as supporting evidences to any doctrinal assumption.

To the heart of translation theory, translators and interpreters have to do their best in keeping the three core values which comprise of (1) accuracy, (2) naturalness, and (3) understanding, without altering the original intent of the source text’s communicator. It is, therefore, both an art and science in translation to keep the right balance of these three core values when a message is rendered from the source language to the target language. There are also several principles and techniques which translators should observe and apply in order to produce the best translation work possible.

As in the Lord Buddha’s teachings (Dhamma & Vinaya), it is clear that the scriptures have been translated and revised from time to time over the period of more than two thousand years. It is unfortunate that translation

science has not been available dated back long enough to assist the Buddhist scholars to make good judgment when they translated scriptures. Thus, the 'freestyle' translations which were made without proper principles can bring about incompleteness and deviation from the source language, more or less, in terms of accuracy, naturalness, understanding, and the communicator's original intent.

Referring to the academic argument on the selfhood and non-selfhood of the Nirvana, it is highly recommended that Buddhist scholars should study the translation science in order to prevent the misleading and/or misinterpretation of their translation on the Dhamma & Vinaya due to the complication of language and their own influential ideas.

For example, the quote "*Sabbhe Dhamma Anatta...*" should be presented in such a way that the whole discourse is well understood as the term 'Dhamma' alone can reflect different meanings in different contents or statements. It is extremely necessary to understand what 'Dhamma' refers to in the first place per the Lord Buddha's objective. Otherwise, it will be too naïve to develop such a strong assumption based on a single multifaceted term or statement.

Comparison of the same doctrine in different languages is also a must as we should take into account of the issue of 'deviation' when a scripture is translated. In addition, translators should be aware of the more or less possible mistakes or human errors in Pali or non-Pali scriptures.

Most of all, when we have to make the best judgment out of the translation and/or interpretation, remember that the whole content of Dhamma and Vinaya must have integrity. This means that the translation and/or interpretation of Dhamma & Vinaya should not be made in such a way that they contradict to each other even though they were conveyed by the Lord

Buddha in different approaches to different audiences on different occasions.

For example, if an academician is to interpret "*Sabbhe Dhamma Anatta*" as the non-selfhood of Nirvana, s(he) must be able to interpret and explain "*Nibbanam Paramam Sukham*" in such a way that it is true as well. It is recommended that a concept is compared and contrasted at all levels, e.g. term, statement, paragraph, and discourse. Please invest extra effort on 'back translation' and 'equation of facts' which is a mathematical approach to prove your translation and/or interpretation. For example, if "*Sabbhe Dhamma Anatta*" is translated as "All Dhammic phenomena is non-self," does it mean that the '*Anatta*,' as a Dhamma, is also 'non-self' or not?

Lastly, it is highly recommended that Buddhist scholars and academicians should study the translation science for the benefit of translating/interpreting the Dhamma & Vinaya. Notwithstanding, they should bear in mind that the translation and interpretation of Dhamma & Vinaya as well as commentaries are always the 'secondary' sources which are not as important as the Pali cannon; although, they can be meaningful and insightful. Readers should be advised to trace back to the original Pali scriptures as a reference in order to further their own study and judgment, if necessary.