Thoughts on the Translation of Buddhist Texts into English

Paul SWANSON

The original topic of my presentation was “Translating the *Mo-ho chih-kuan* into English.” After being told the broad theme of the panel (“New trends in the study of East Asian Buddhism, from the perspective of American researchers”) I thought my theme too limited, and offered the wider theme of “Translating Tendai texts into English.” After further reflection I thought even this too limited and, given the fact that I have already published essays on the translation of Tendai texts, I decided to give an even more general presentation on some points regarding the translation of Buddhist texts into English. I cannot go into much detail in the limited space/time available (10 minutes for the presentation), so I will briefly take up three points on this subject, and then illustrate these points by discussing three rather different publications (or projects) consisting of translations of Buddhist texts into English.

I . Three Points on Translation.

I will make three simple points with regard to the translation of Buddhist texts :

1. I wish to reaffirm the importance of translating Buddhist texts. There are still many important and interesting Buddhist texts that have not been translated, and very few good translations among those that have. This is not to say that texts or translations are the only (or necessarily the most important) material for academic analysis and understanding of Buddhist tradition (or traditions), but certainly few would deny that an accurate portrayal of Buddhism cannot be accomplished without adequate access to its written texts.
2. It may strike my audience as awkward or strange that I would make above point, since one may assume that everyone here would recognize the importance of this task for Buddhist studies. Despite the importance of translation, however, it is still true that the work is not given appropriate credit or recognition, at least not commensurate with the skill and effort required to do it properly. We have all sat on committees evaluating our colleagues' work, such as in a job application or possible promotion, and almost inevitably someone

will make the comment that such-and-such a listing on the CV is “only a translation” and thus cannot be counted as a “real” or “full” academic contribution. Certainly some translations are “worth” more than others, but a translation (like any academic work) must be judged on its merits. The blanket prejudice against translation in general still persists, and often goes unchallenged. It should be added that to some bodhisattva-like people “getting credit” is not a major concern or important issue, but to many others it is a crucial factor on getting or maintaining employment or promotion, and if credit is not duly given, important translation work will be left undone, or left unpublished.

3. The work of translation is endless. Not only is the Buddha-dharma inexhaustible, there is never a perfect or final translation, so the same text calls for repeated translation. A corollary to this point is to ask : how do we decide which texts to translate and why? Which texts are “important” or “representative” and on what basis is such a decision to be made? One can argue that the text has been important or influential, that the contents are stimulating or philosophically sophisticated, or that it reveals something important, or that it “advances understanding,” and so forth. Or, it may be the case that one text is translated rather than another due to serendipity (one happens to come across it), or due to monetary considerations (someone offers to pay you to translate it), or due to convenience (there is already an annotated modern Japanese translation available which one can rely on for support). In any case, there will always be more texts than can ever be properly translated.

II. Three Examples of Translations.

I would like to briefly present three publications (two series and a journal) to illustrate the state of translation of Buddhist texts into English, and to flesh out the above three points. I should add that I have been subjectively involved and contributed to all three publications, so I cannot claim complete objectivity with regard to any of them, nor, on the other hand, are my “criticisms” that of an uninvolved outsider.

1. The BDK English Tripitaka project

This justly famous series is an attempt to translate and make widely available, and easily accessible, a traditional list of “classical” Buddhist texts, heavy on the side of doctrinal treatises. The list includes many texts that have never before been translated, and this is a welcome addition to any Buddhologist’s (or Buddhist’s) library. There has been much debate over the choices made concerning the choice of texts and style of translation,

and this raises the point again as to what is “important” and “representative.” Let me just briefly point out that the list is, for better or worse, chosen from a Japanese perspective, reflecting the historical and sectarian development of Japanese Buddhism. I do not mean this as a necessarily negative criticism ; after all, this is a “Japanese” project.

2. Princeton's *Buddhism in Practice* and the “Religions in Practice” series

Recently Princeton has published a “Princeton Readings in Religions” series that consists of translations with quite a different focus than, for example, the “traditional” texts found in the BDK series. These volumes consist of a varied and eclectic mix of texts which attempt to reflect the actual “practice” of religious traditions, “designed to do nothing less than reshape the way in which Buddhism is understood.” The collection takes up what may (though it could be argued that they should not) be called “minor” texts. Rather than the editors pre-selecting the contents, a call went out to scholars in the field to share their heretofore unpublished translations, from whose submissions the final contents were chosen. Again it could be argued whether the results are “representative” of Buddhism, or merely (and accidentally) reflect the fickle interests of current Western Buddhist scholars. A similar project in 20 or 30 years would result in a completely different (though probably equally interesting and representative) collection. Still, one could argue that these collections are more “representative” of Buddhism as it is actually practiced than the traditional collection of doctrinal texts, dealing as they do with a wider range of human concerns.

3. The *Buddhist Literature* journal

This new journal was founded recently (the first volume came out in 1999) to serve “as a forum for the publication of translations of Buddhist texts... to increase the range of Buddhist literature available in English translation,” to fill what was seen as a lacuna in the field, namely, the lack of a forum for publishing translations. Based on the contents of the first volume, the journal promises to be an excellent source for highly reliable and richly annotated translations. Most academic journals do not accept “just” translations, an aspect of the prejudice against translation mentioned above, resulting in a lack of availability even of many translations that have been finished by scholars (and lie dormant on their hard discs). The name of the journal perfectly illustrates the dilemma of a scholar who translates texts yet is wary of not receiving proper credit for his/her work : *Buddhist Literature*, not “Buddhism in Translation.” Although this is a journal dedicated to publishing translations of Buddhist texts, the editor deliberately avoided putting the word “translation” in the name

of the journal, for to do so may cause the work published therein to be “downgraded” and not be acknowledged as a “real” or “full” academic contribution. The naming of the journal, thus, was a “skillful means” to promote translations while seeking to avoid the prejudice against it.

* * *

In this limited presentation I have only touched briefly on a few of many points that could be made concerning the translation of Buddhist texts. One final note in summation : although I have been speaking about translating Buddhist texts into English, I think it is clear that the same points apply to the translation of Buddhist texts into modern Japanese : it is a very important task, yet the work is not recognized fully as an academic achievement, the work is endless and the decision as to which texts should be translated is ambiguous and debatable.

〈 Keywords 〉 translation, English, Buddhist texts

(Professor, Nanzan University)