

## Book Review

*Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts: An Elementary Grammatical Guide.* By K.L. Dhammajoti. Hong Kong: Buddha-dharma Centre of Hong Kong. 2012. vii + 361 pp. ISBN 978-988-16820-1-7.

The scholar Wendy Doniger once observed that people who take up the study of Sanskrit tend to divide into two camps: those who are interested primarily in Hinduism, and those who are interested primarily in Buddhism.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Bhikkhu K. L. Dhammajoti takes up a similar theme in the Preface to *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts*. There are, he explains, many fine books available for those who want to learn Sanskrit, but none of these are written especially for people who want to learn Sanskrit in order to read Buddhist texts. It is for such people that Prof. Dhammajoti has produced this book. His implied aim is to spare prospective readers of Buddhist texts from having “to spend a large amount of effort and time in getting acquainted with those texts which are neither their concern proper nor source of inspiration, mastering their vocabularies and idiomatic expressions, only to find that at the end of a year or so of study, they still need to spend [a] considerable amount of effort to even begin reading the Buddhist sources” (p. v).

Prof. Dhammajoti is the Glorious Sun Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong, where he regularly teaches the popular course “Readings in Buddhist Sanskrit Texts”. The book *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts* has grown out of that experience in particular, and is essentially a repackaging of course materials Prof. Dhammajoti has developed over the years, with some important additions.

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Gombrich, personal communication, July 2011.

Prof. Dhammajoti is careful to distinguish between what he calls “Buddhist Sanskrit” and “Hybrid Buddhist Sanskrit” (p. vi). It is the former which is the concern of *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts*. Prof. Dhammajoti describes rather than defines Buddhist Sanskrit texts: generally they “do not violate classical Sanskrit grammar in a fundamental manner, even though they admittedly employ terminologies and expressions not attested in classical Indian non-Buddhist texts” (p. vi). Examples of Buddhist Sanskrit texts identified by Prof. Dhammajoti include the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*, popularly known as the “Diamond Sutra”, and other “Perfection of Wisdom” sutras, and it is from these and other Buddhist texts that Prof. Dhammajoti has extracted “all vocabulary, examples, and exercises” (p. vi) found in each lesson (with a few ancillary alterations). The result is that with this book one begins immediately, from the very first lesson and through all subsequent lessons, to learn Sanskrit by studying what is characteristic of, or at least what is found in, Buddhist texts (sandhi is ignored in the first lessons).

In teaching exclusively through examples and exercises taken directly from texts, Prof. Dhammajoti follows the approach taken by A. K. Warder in *Introduction to Pali* (which appears on an included list of Useful References, p. 317). Like *Introduction to Pali*, and like other Sanskrit primers, *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts* consists of lessons which progressively cover more advanced topics, with each lesson containing a vocabulary and exercises. But in the case of *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts*, the exercises consist entirely of translating phrases and sentences from the aforementioned *Vajracchedikā* and other texts from Sanskrit to English. The student who completes all the exercises will have translated a large portion of the *Vajracchedikā*, and many passages from other Buddhist texts as well. Answers to the exercises are not provided, but, as we shall see, the book compensates for this lack in interesting ways.

Readers should be aware that after a most perfunctory discussion of the Sanskrit alphabet and the *devanāgarī* script (pp. 1-2), all examples, exercises, and vocabulary are given in Roman script. Therefore a more descriptive title for the book might be *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts in Roman Script*. But here again we will see that the book has a pleasant surprise in store for those who through other means learn to read *devanāgarī*.

One of the more important parts of the book is a substantial master Sanskrit-English vocabulary (estimated at approximately 1,400 entries). Words are indexed to the lesson in which they are introduced, and as a bonus Prof. Dhammajoti has provided a corresponding Chinese word or expression for many Sanskrit

terms.<sup>2</sup> It is of course by providing a vocabulary that Prof. Dhammajoti aims to help students understand commonplace Sanskrit words, as well as the special “terminologies and expressions” found in Buddhist Sanskrit texts. Some vocabulary entries will indeed be quite helpful for those new to the material. For example, the entry for *dhātuḥ* (p. 322) points out that while in classical Sanskrit *dhātuḥ* is masculine, in Buddhist texts it is often feminine. Entries which identify a word as the proper name of some entity found in a Buddhist text will also be very helpful for newcomers. Yet, while the master vocabulary is an important and undoubtedly valuable part of the book, it is marred by two major defects. The first is that words appear in the order of the English alphabet, not in their proper Sanskrit order. The second is that the master vocabulary is divided into sections, listed here in the order they appear (pp. 318-357): “Noun”, “Agent nouns”, “Verbs”, “Gerund”, “Infinitives”, “Imperatives”, “Participles”, “Adjectives”, “Indeclinables/Adverbs”, “Pronoun”, and “Numerals”. This division works well enough at the end of each lesson, where new words and types of words are introduced, but it is a poor organizing principal for a master vocabulary. One foresees that time and effort will be wasted in the search for words which a student does not know how to classify according to Prof. Dhammajoti’s categories. This artificial division also impedes, rather than encourages, efforts to first see and then understand words which are related to one another, for example different types of words beginning with a common verbal root.

Complaints more to do with form than substance apply to other parts of the book as well. These complaints are prompted by the conviction that form itself can help or hinder the learning process, especially for a highly systematic language such as Sanskrit in which pattern recognition is vital. One wishes the formatting of the entire book would consistently aid, rather than display indifference toward, the development of this critical skill. Consider for example the book’s many inflectional paradigms. They are shown in a tabular form with centre-aligned columns, whereas the columns ought to be left-aligned, the better to draw attention to the fact that case *endings vary* instead of drawing attention to the irrelevant visual phenomenon whereby columns seem to undulate in *varying width*. Whatever the reason for this particular formatting choice, for the book overall one cannot avoid the impression that word processing software too often has been allowed to dictate what the reader sees and experiences, with many unfortunate results.

---

<sup>2</sup>A gesture aimed largely at the majority of Professor Dhammajoti’s students at the University of Hong Kong, but useful for all with an interest in Chinese translations of Sanskrit terms.

This accounts for some of the defects already noted, as well as the book's many inopportune page breaks, including those which prevent an inflectional paradigm from being seen and contemplated as a single unit. It also accounts for the presence of relentlessly hierarchal but futile headings and "numbered" lists, courtesy of which valuable space on the physical page and in the reader's mind is burdened with the distracting display of labels such as "13.1.2.IV.1 Paradigm (a)" and "13.1.2.IV.2 Paradigm (b)", as on pp. 226-227. Closely related is the more general but equally lamentable tendency found throughout the book to overuse, and misuse, bullet points.

The book also has a generous share of typos, mistakes and other irregularities. To point out just a few: Michael Coulson is repeatedly misidentified as "L. S. Coulson" (p. 177 n. 3, p. 178 n. 11); the list of abbreviations (pp. viii-ix) contains duplicate entries for "voc", and nearly duplicate entries for "Vy"; the master vocabulary has *vibhū* for 'lord, king' instead of *vibhu* (p. 333); the explanation of *tathā* on p. 86 has been collapsed into the line devoted to *yathā*; the word "respectively" on p. 86 is misspelled "respctively"; an anomalous page-sized "text box" with no internal margins to the left, right, or top awkwardly encompasses all the exercises on p. 175.

How much the book's formatting and mistakes actually degrade "signal" and cause it to be lost amid "noise" is for each reader to decide. Because learning Sanskrit is already challenging for many people, even without distractions, and because there is much to admire in this book, one hopes that a second edition will come forth under the hand of a strong editor.

In terms of content I have emphasized the targeted nature of *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts*, but I do not mean to suggest the book is light in its treatment of classical Sanskrit grammar. Prof. Dhammajoti modestly uses terms such as "elementary" (in the subtitle), "simple" (p. v) and "basic" (p. vi) to hint at the scope of the book, but devotes a full 239 pages, not including the master glossary and certain other supplemental material, to the fundamental points of the language. By comparison, the 2010 edition of Coulson's *Complete Sanskrit* (with approximately similar dimensions but higher data density and a decent treatment of *devanāgarī*) runs to 232 pages, not including the master vocabulary and other supplemental material. *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts* is not meant to be a comprehensive grammar, but it is more than elementary. Perhaps it is fair to say that the book goes into enough grammatical detail for students to start doing what the title suggest they could be doing. Attention to grammatical detail is seen per-

haps most clearly in the book's marked proclivity to push the analysis of forms derived from verbal roots: the symbol  $\sqrt{\quad}$  and a selection of quasi-mathematical operators are employed often and to good effect, in the lessons and in the master vocabulary, in what seem to be hundreds of examples.

Indeed there is often a mathematical or formulaic flavour to the book's treatment of Sanskrit grammar. Frequently this is quite effective, given the systematic nature of Sanskrit, but one feels that attempts to figuratively represent the complexity of external sandhi do not really succeed. Prof. Dhammajoti presents an external sandhi grid (p. 316) that is compressed<sup>3</sup> and cryptic, employing a symbol and four codes in what appears to be a bold attempt to reduce the vertical dimension of the array. It is doubtful that any benefit is gained through sacrificing resolution in this way, and to me the grid seems over-engineered.

A penchant for the formulaic also comes through in some of the book's prose (p. 188):

An absolutive construction is one in which the participle (p) agrees with a subject (s1) which is different from the subject (sv) of the verb of the sentence. s1 may be either a noun or a pronoun; p may be either a past or present participle.

When both s1 and p are in the loc...

In other cases the prose is more natural, the explanation more nuanced (p. 62):

*api* and *kim*, when placed in front of a statement, turn the latter into a question. Among the two, *api* is the stronger in tone, soliciting a definite "yes" or "no" response. Sometimes the particle *nu* is added to *kim/api*, which reinforces the tone of the question.

In yet other cases Prof. Dhammajoti is a neutral reporter (p. 42):

To explain this manner of occurrence of *sah/sa*, some grammarians speak of two forms...

---

<sup>3</sup>The grid contains 45 discreet entries representing the intersection of permitted finals and initial letters. In comparison, Bucknell's external sandhi grid contains 154 discrete entries (Sanskrit Manual, 2006, p. 74). Even greater resolution is achieved by Coulson, whose external sandhi grid contains 190 discrete entries (Complete Sanskrit, 2010, p. 27).

This latter role is one Prof. Dhammajoti seems to enjoy. Having disclaimed being “a specialist grammarian” (p. v), Prof. Dhammajoti is free to be non-dogmatic with respect to such controversies in Sanskrit grammar as may sometimes surface. For example, in his presentation of *bahuvrihi* compounds, Prof. Dhammajoti states (p. 164): “Generally, its last member is a noun or an adjective used substantively. But there are some exceptions”. The discussion is then taken offline, so to speak, and in a long chapter endnote Prof. Dhammajoti explains that some grammarians, but not all, insist that a *bahuvrihi* necessarily ends in a substantive (p. 177 n. 11). Citations of the works or words of Duroiselle, Warder, Monier-Williams, Whitney, and Coulson follow.

Through notes such as this one, and still other more remarkable notes ranging from commentary on Conze’s translation word choices to the way Pali (as opposed to Sanskrit) texts present a particular passage, one comes to better appreciate Prof. Dhammajoti’s achievement. That is to say, whereas authors such as Warder and Coulson enriched their books on Pali and Sanskrit, respectively, with lines of elegant prose which are often a joy to read, Prof. Dhammajoti has enriched his book with an eclectic assortment of notes that initiate the student into what might be called the joys of textual scholarship. Besides the notes already mentioned, there are notes which deal with doctrinal matters, knowledge of which is necessary for an appreciation of the Sanskrit passage in question. Other notes, and these are many, are entirely in Chinese and deal with Chinese translations of Sanskrit passages, drawing from the work of Xuan Zang, for example, or Kumārajīva. Many of the notes pertain to the exercises; one points out that a particular vocative seems out of place in a text; others suggest English translation choices on the basis of venerable Chinese translations. Taken as a whole, the notes constitute a surprising and valuable part of the book. Above all they reveal to the newcomer that behind the massive facade of rules, the paradigms, the theoretical precision of the Sanskrit language, the texts themselves still hold plenty of mystery and wonder.

I have mentioned the exercises above, but I should point out here that whether they have notes or not, the exercises make up another very valuable part of the book. Most passages which make up the exercises seem to have been chosen with care, not only for their grammatical potential, but also for reasons of doctrinal

interest, or perhaps even for their fame.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, almost all the passages have been identified (by text and, apparently, the numbering system conventionally used for that text). Students who complete all the exercises will have become acquainted with portions of a dozen texts, and will be able to identify and pursue these texts for further study.

There is one more feature of this book which is particularly noteworthy. Prof. Dhammajoti has performed the thankless task of retranslating the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* (i.e. the “Diamond Sutra”) from Conze’s 1957 edition of the Sanskrit text. A formatting triumph has been achieved on pp. 241-310, where the entire Sanskrit text of the *Vajracchedikā* has been reproduced in both Roman and *devanāgarī* script on the left page, with Prof. Dhammajoti’s English translation on the right page, paragraph lined up neatly across from corresponding paragraph. The *devanāgarī* is clear, handsome, and large enough to be read with no trouble. In a few cases Prof. Dhammajoti has emended the text, marking changes in bold type.

As for the translation itself, connoisseurs of English prose may not find parts of it particularly lovely, or even comprehensible (p. 246):

As many, Subhūti, beings as there are, subsumed by the being-subsumption under the being sphere...

Here is the Sanskrit text (p. 245) of the same passage, along with Conze’s translation (Conze, 2001, p. 15):

*yāvantaḥ subhūte sattvāḥ sattvadhātau sattvasaṃgrahena saṃgrhītā...*

As many beings as there are in the universe of beings, comprehended under the term ‘beings’...

When one compares the translations to the actual Sanskrit text, one sees that Prof. Dhammajoti has tried to stay close to the Sanskrit by including the vocative *subhūte* (“Subhūti”) and communicating a sense of *saṃgrahena saṃgrhītā* (“subsumed by the subsumption”). That is, Prof. Dhammajoti has tried to account for each word, something that Conze is known for not doing. In this example

---

<sup>4</sup>As Prof. Dhammajoti notes in the Preface, many of his students in Hong Kong have some knowledge of Mahāyāna texts in Chinese. For these students the book sheds light on the Sanskrit version of well-known words and phrases.

Conze's translation is by far the more readable, and surely the one more intelligible to most people. But Prof. Dhammajoti is not writing for most people; he has tried to produce more of a word-for-word translation for the benefit of students new to the study of Sanskrit. Despite misgivings about some of Prof. Dhammajoti's word choices, I am sure that students new to Sanskrit, or new to Buddhist Sanskrit, will profit from the translation as they work through the many exercises drawn from the *Vajracchedikā*, or, finished with lessons, they tackle the entire text on their own. That is what this book holds out the promise of: that one can get to the point where one can read an actual Buddhist Sanskrit text. This book will go a long way towards helping students reach that goal.

### Bibliography

- Bucknell, R. (2006). *Sanskrit Manual*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (Reprint).
- Conze, E. (2001). *Buddhist Wisdom*. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House.
- Coulson, M., Gombrich, R., & Benson, J. (2010). *Complete Sanskrit*. Blacklick, Ohio: McGraw-Hill.
- Dhammajoti, K. L. (2012). *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts: An Elementary Grammatical Guide*. Hong Kong: Buddha-dharma Centre of Hong Kong.
- Warder, A. K. (2005). *Introduction to Pali*. Oxford: Pali Text Society (Reprint of 3rd edition).

Brett Shults  
 Independent scholar  
[brett.shults@gmail.com](mailto:brett.shults@gmail.com)