

Buddhist Terminology in Various Cultural Contexts

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Background

- Major Field: East Asian Buddhism or Mahāyāna Buddhism (the Great Vehicle) in terms of its intellectual history in pre-modern East Asian culture.
- Languages involved: Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese
- Cultures involved: Pre-modern Chinese and Japanese cultures
- Specifically the Song Dynasty (960–1279) in China and the Kamakura period (1185–1333) in Japan)
- Cross-regional studies and interdisciplinary
- research

Issues in Buddhist Text Translation

- Buddhist studies and related fields have begun popular in the U. S.
- Languages as an essential tool for cultural studies
- Deal with primary source in research
- Misleading or improper translation due to lack of cultural understanding and historical consciousness

Forms of Buddhism

- Theravāda Buddhism: Canonical Language: Pāli
- Mahāyāna Buddhism (East Asian Buddhism): Canonical Languages: Sanskrit and Classical Chinese
- Tibetan Buddhism: Canonical Languages: Sanskrit and Classical Tibetan language

Terms-concepts-objects in Buddhist philosophy

- Terms: pointing finger
- Concepts (the relative truth or logic):
pointing direction
- Object (the absolute truth or
ontology): the moon itself
- Interrelated and non-dual relationship

The same terms in various cultural contexts

- Terms may convey similar concepts but different connotation in various cultural contexts
- For example:
- Saṃsāra in Hinduism: reincarnation or transmigration. There is an Ātman or “self” or soul migrating from one place to another after death:
- Saṃsāra in Buddhism: the rebirth. There is a rebirth but no one who is reborn (anātman or no-self or emptiness).

The same terms in various cultural contexts cont.

- Terms may expand their meaning in the course of thought development
- For example:
- Nirvāṇa in Hinduism: the union of ātman and Brahman or the supreme being as the way of liberation.
- Nirvāṇa in Theravāda Buddhism: the end of the circle of birth and death or liberation from suffering when realizing the non-self.
- Nirvāṇa in Mahāyāna Buddhism: the full enlightenment when realizing the non-duality of the rebirth and the end of the rebirth based on the philosophy of emptiness.

The same terms in various cultural contexts cont.

- 空華 (kha-puṣpa) in Chinese Buddhist texts: literal meaning: flowers in the sky. Symbol for illusion (negative meaning).
- 空華: in Dōgen's Japanese Buddhist texts (*Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏): flowers of emptiness: symbol for the function (用) of nature (體) (positive meaning).

Conclusion

- Translation not only deals with languages but also requires:
- Cultural understanding and historical consciousness
- UIUC East Asian Languages and Cultures department:
- <http://www.ealc.uiuc.edu/>
- UIUC Center for Translation Studies:
- <http://www.translation.illinois.edu/>
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