Editorial

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This month will see the launch of a major project in Pali pedagogy: the online Pali course by Alexander Wynne and Alex Wrona. Since this is the third instalment in my attempt to popularise the study of Pali, let me briefly explain the history of that attempt.

From 1965 to 2004 I held positions at Oxford University to teach Sanskrit and Pali, with a strong emphasis on Sanskrit. When I took mandatory retirement on reaching the age of 67, I reflected on why I was dissatisfied with my record as a Pali teacher, despite having had students who were intelligent and gifted, and for the most part highly motivated. The level of their attainment at the end of a two-year course had been judged by a final written examination, tedious for examiner and examined alike.

I felt that several things had been less than ideal. Let me summarise the three which I find the most important: (1) use of time; (2) learning inappropriately in terms of both goals and methods; (3) learning in isolation.

1. By a tradition which would have been difficult to change, the Pali course lasted two years. The University had/has three terms a year, each lasting eight weeks, with two vacations of six weeks and a summer vacation of sixteen weeks. By the same tradition, Pali was taught throughout each term twice a week for one hour. So the Pali course consisted of sixteen contact hours per term, forty-eight hours per year, and ninety-six hours in all. Surely that should be enough to get a good grounding in the language?

The snag is the spacing. Half way through the course, there was a sixteen-week break, long enough to forget almost everything learnt so far. In theory, which generations ago may have had some remote connection to practice, students continued to study (mainly by themselves) during the vacations, but in those days social and economic conditions were very different, and in modern times almost all students find it necessary to take paid employment in the vacations. (Some take paid employment even in term time, even though many universities try to discourage this.)

It is clearly inefficient to study any subject with so spaced out a timetable, and this is likely to apply powerfully to learning a language, the acquisition of which has to be cumulative, particularly in the early stages. Reforming this dysfunctional timetable is not possible so long as achievement is measured by a test on a specified day at the very end of the course.

2. The goal of almost everyone who wants to learn Pali is – and should be – to read the teachings of the Buddha. Of course, most people begin by reading them in translation; but close study requires reading them in the original Pali. Often one learns a language because one wants to be able to speak it, understand it when spoken, write it and read it, but to Pali only the last applies, which means that it makes sense to leave aside several aspects – even if most people will want to know how to pronounce it. As for method, modern technology means that the traditional emphasis on memorisation is outmoded: dictionaries are even more accessible now that they have been digitised, and even grammatical forms can be assimilated by dint of meeting them constantly while reading, rather than spending time and effort on rote learning at the outset.

3. Learning is enhanced if students work together. The present system, focussed on examinations, promotes competition, which is far less efficient than cooperation – partly because most people find cooperation more enjoyable, but more importantly because many minds are better than one. It is possible to get members of a university Pali class to do some work together, but rarely outside term time.

There were other reasons why I found it necessary to write a new Pali course. For example, they deal too little with syntax -- Wilhelm Geiger's authoritative *Pali Grammar* has none at all! – and their account of the use of the dative is usually wrong. But this is not the place to explore these details.

I began my attempted improvements by holding residential courses for 12 days. The first ones were in Sharpham in Devon, later ones in Oxford. Residential courses were of course particularly successful in tackling problem (3) above, creating an *esprit de corps* among the students. Quite soon we added a significant improvement: Mr (later Dr) Tomoyoki Kono joined us as assistant teacher; he specialised in giving individual attention to the slower students, so that it became rare for anyone to be left behind.

The main drawback of the residential courses was financial: both students and teachers had to pay for board and lodging, and travel to the course venue was too costly for most overseas aspirants. In 2015 a pupil at an Oxford course, Ms Ilona Budapesti, persuaded me to make a second attempt by giving the course **live on-line,** thus in effect opening it up to pupils all over the world; she also demonstrated how to do it, using Zoom. We experimented with different timings and formats, and more or less settled on a course given over 20 days, during which pupils were also expected to do some homework. There was teaching for about half the day on 18 days. I began each teaching day with a lecture, and then students were put into small groups who worked together; there were one or two assistant teachers who visited the groups and helped both groups and individuals, as required. This variety of teaching provision was very effective. We found, however, that there is no one perfect solution: take up of these courses soon became too meagre for them to be economically viable. For some, no doubt, they were too expensive, and probably others found it impractical to dedicate a block of three weeks to almost full time study.

It now seems that we should make a third attempt by offering courses which are easier to attend, because the timing is left to the pupil; they therefore have to be recorded rather than live. Thus they can also be considerably cheaper. Initially we lose all the ways we earlier devised for coping with problem (3), but in the course of time we may introduce such modifications as tutorials, for single pupils or groups. The material is based on the existent OCBS course book (which is copyright), but in the absence of live teaching that has to be heavily supplemented by further detail, and particularly by exercises. Both

Wynne and Wrona have taught on the live on-line course and thus know the material well.

We welcome feedback, and hope that at last we may have hit on a way to spread an understanding of Pali much more widely over the world.