

On Translating “Buddha”

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Abstract

Translators of Buddhist texts into English have rendered *bodhi* and its cognates, particularly *buddha*, in two different ways, each based on an implicit metaphor. *Bodhi* has been translated as “enlightenment” and “awakening,” *buddha* as “enlightened one” and “awakened one.” While the former alternative in each pair prevailed among earlier translators, in recent years a swing has taken place to “awakening” and “awakened one.” The argument offered to support this change contends that these words are more faithful to the root *budh* from which they are derived than “enlightenment” and “enlightened one.” In this paper the author argues in defense of “enlightenment.” He bases his defense on three grounds: (1) the meaning the words “enlightenment” and “awakening” bear in ordinary English diction, and how those meanings relate to the descriptions of the Buddha’s experience of *bodhi* found in the Nikāyas; (2) the actual meaning of the Pāli-Sanskrit root *budh* and its derivatives such as *bodhi* and *buddha*, which he maintains primarily signify understanding or perceptual knowledge rather than awakening; and (3) the imagery used in the texts to convey the “flavor” of the Buddha’s attainment and his function in relation to the world.

From the Buddha’s first sermon onward, the entire history of Buddhism flows from the experience the Buddha underwent in his thirty-fifth year while seated on the bank of the Nerañjarā River near the village of Uruvelā. He called this experience *anuttarā sammā sambodhi*, and it was by virtue of this attainment

that he could describe himself as a *sammā sambuddha*. *Anuttarā* is an adjective meaning “unsurpassed, supreme,” and *sammā* an indeclinable that might be rendered “perfect” or “complete.” Both words describe *sambodhi*, a prefixed form of the noun *bodhi*, from the verbal root *budh*. The prefix *sam* is a mere intensifier, adding a sense of fullness to the base noun.¹ The word *buddha* itself is a past participle of the verb *bujjhati*, from this same root.

Translators of Buddhist texts into English have rendered *bodhi* and its cognates, particularly *buddha*, in two different ways: *bodhi* as “enlightenment” and “awakening,” *buddha* as “enlightened one” and “awakened one.” Both English words are figurative, each based on an implicit metaphor: the former, a movement from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge; the latter, a change of mental state, from sleep to full awareness.

Already the early translators of Buddhist texts into English differed in their choices among these renderings, and a single translator might even switch from one to the other. Max Müller, in his *Chips from a German Workshop* (1872), wrote that “Buddha is an appellative meaning Enlightened” (p. 209) and that Gotama “claimed the name of Buddha, ‘the Enlightened’” (p. 244). But in his translation of the *Dhammapada* (1881) he rendered Buddha as “the Awakened.” T.W. Rhys Davids, the founder of the Pali Text Society, uses “Fully-enlightened One” for *sammā sambuddha* and “supreme and perfect enlightenment” for *anuttarā sammā sambodhi* in his anthology, *Buddhist Suttas* (1881, p. 47). But in the first volume of his *Dialogues of the Buddha* he translates *sammā sambuddha* as “all-awakened-one” (1899, p. 67). F.L. Woodward, the early translator of the Saṃyutta Nikāya (“The Book of the Kindred Sayings”), uses “enlightenment,” while E.M. Hare, the early translator of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (“The Book of the Gradual Sayings”), uses both “awakening” and “enlightenment,” even in the same volume.² I.B. Horner consistently uses “Awakening” and “Awakened One.”³

Among translators working in Sri Lanka, both Westerners and Sri Lankans, “enlightenment” and “enlightened one” prevailed through most of the twentieth century. The German monastic pioneer, Nyanatiloka Thera, in his *Word of the Buddha* uses “enlightenment” as a rendering for *bodhi*, though in his

¹ The explanation of *sam* at Vism 201–2 as representing *sāmaṃ*, “by himself,” is probably a mere word play. There is no essential difference between *bojjhaṅga* and *sambojjhaṅga*, but *sam* merely adds the nuance of fullness.

² See for instance *Gradual Sayings* 3:175–77, where “awakening” is used, and 3:2, 22, 117, where we find “enlightenment.”

³ See for example her translation of the Mahāvagga, 1951:1.

explanation of “Buddha” he recognizes both: “Buddha or Enlightened One—literally, Knower or Awakened One.” His pupils, Nyanaponika and Ñāṇamoli, consistently use “enlightenment” and “Enlightened One” in their writings, as do the leading English-speaking Sri Lankan monks of the post-colonial period, such as Nārada, Piyadassi, and Walpola Rāhula.

In recent years, among scholars and translators a swing has taken place away from “enlightenment” toward “awakening” for *bodhi*, and from “Enlightened One” to “Awakened One” for *buddha*. The rationale for this shift is succinctly stated by the prominent philologist, K.R. Norman, another former president of the Pali Text Society:

The translation “enlightenment” is normally reserved for *bodhi* or *sambodhi*, but it is somewhat misleading in that the root *budh* which underlies these words has no direct connection with “light.” The root means literally “to wake up,” or metaphorically “to wake up (to a fact), to know it,” and “awakening” would be a more literal translation of *bodhi*. The past participle *buddha* is used actively to mean “one who has awakened, one who has gained knowledge.”⁴

This trend continues, with “awakening” and “awakened one” now the preference of such scholars and translators as Rupert Gethin and the bhikkhus Thānissaro, Anālayo, Ānandajoti, and Sujāto. The large encyclopedic volume called *The Buddhist World* also consistently uses “awakening” for *bodhi*, on the grounds that the Sanskrit root *budh* literally means “to wake up.”⁵ Gethin, the current president of the Pali Text Society, explains the meaning of *buddha* in reference to what he sees as the underlying metaphor:

In brief, the word “buddha” is not a name but a title; its meaning is “one who has woken up.” This title is generally applied by the

⁴ Norman 1993:129. See too Norman 2006:38–39. In the latter passage Norman says that “enlightenment” is misleading because it can be confused with the word’s use to describe the European intellectual movement of the eighteenth century. I don’t see this as at all problematic, for our minds can easily separate the two spheres of reference. The more serious problem with “enlightenment” is that it conveys a particular mystique, signifying a state that defies rational comprehension. But “awakening” has the opposite drawback of suggesting a state of mere heightened awareness or a sudden recognition of our existential plight rather than a deep, inwardly transformative level of understanding.

⁵ Powers 2016:5.

Buddhist tradition to a class of beings who are, from the perspective of ordinary humanity, extremely rare and quite extraordinary. In contrast to these Buddhas or “awakened ones” the mass of humanity, along with the other creatures and beings that constitute the world, are asleep—asleep in the sense that they pass through their lives never knowing and seeing the world “as it is” (*yathābhūtam*).⁶

Outside the scholarly world, in popular presentations of Buddhism, especially in the West, the words “awakening” and “awakened” have triumphed over their older competitors. This may have been partly driven by the observations of the scholars cited above, but the change in preference may also have occurred because, for most people, the idea of awakening is more accessible, more concrete, and more “hip” than the rather mystifying idea of “enlightenment.”

While the choice of renderings for the Pāli-Sanskrit terms at issue here depends to some extent on the understanding and temperament of the translator, I believe there are sound reasons for preferring “enlightenment” to “awakening” as a rendering of *bodhi* or *sambodhi*, and for preferring “enlightened one” to “awakened one” as a rendering of *buddha*. In this paper I want to argue the case for these preferences. I will base my argument on three grounds: (1) the meaning these terms bear in ordinary English diction, and how those meanings relate to the descriptions of the Buddha’s experience of *bodhi* found in the Nikāyas; (2) the actual meaning of the Pāli-Sanskrit root *budh* and its derivatives such as *bodhi* and *buddha*; and (3) the imagery used in the texts to convey the “flavor” of the Buddha’s attainment and his function in relation to the world.

1. Dictionary meanings

It may be hazardous to choose between these two alternatives—“enlightenment” and “awakening”—on the basis of formal dictionary definitions. Such definitions hardly provide a secure basis for accurately rendering words with extremely rich meanings coming from an ancient spiritual tradition rooted in a culture very different from our own. However, while such definitions cannot be treated as decisive, they might still prove helpful in weighing the relative strengths and drawbacks of the alternatives.

⁶ Gethin 2008:xxxii.

Consider, then, the definitions of the two words found in the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

Awakening: (1) a rousing from sleep; (2) a rousing from inactivity or indifference, a revival of interest in something; (3) a coming into awareness.⁷

Enlightenment: (1) the state of having knowledge or understanding; (2) the act of giving someone knowledge or understanding; (3) a movement of the 18th century that stressed the belief that science and logic give people more knowledge and understanding than tradition and religion; (4) *Buddhism*: a final spiritual state marked by the absence of desire or suffering.⁸

I am not concerned here with the fact that the dictionary gives priority to the literal meaning of “awakening” and lists the “final spiritual state” prized by Buddhism under “enlightenment” rather than “awakening.” On this latter point, it’s likely that the dictionary is simply following the precedent established by earlier translators. I want to focus, rather, on the contrast between awakening as “a coming into awareness” and enlightenment as a “state of having [or acquiring] knowledge or understanding.” As I see it, the salient difference between these two definitions is that the former suggests an abrupt glimpse of insight or a change in level of consciousness, while the latter points to thorough and stable comprehension.

Now let us see how the Buddha described his attainment of *anuttarā sammā sambodhi*. The classic description comes toward the end of the first sermon, the *Dhammacakka-ppavattana Sutta*. Here is the passage, with the term in question left untranslated:

“So long, monks, as my correct knowledge and vision, in the above three phases and twelve aspects, was not thoroughly purified in regard to these four noble truths, I did not claim that I had attained the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi* in this world with its devas, Māra, and Brahmā, in this population with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans. But when my correct knowledge and vision, in

⁷ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/awakening>

⁸ <https://www.learnersdictionary.com/definition/enlightenment>

the above three phases and twelve aspects, was thoroughly purified in regard to these four noble truths, then I claimed that I had attained the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi* in this world with its devas....”⁹

The passage in the sutta that precedes this showed that the fully purified knowledge and vision of the four noble truths unfolded in three phases: (1) knowledge of *the referent* of each truth; (2) knowledge of *the task* to be performed in regard to each truth; and (3) knowledge that the task in regard to that truth has been *completed*. When these three phases are applied to the four truths, the twelve aspects of the liberating knowledge emerge. As to the tasks, the truth of suffering must be fully understood; the truth of its origin, namely craving, must be abandoned; the truth of its cessation, *nibbāna*, must be realized; and the truth of the path must be developed. Only when he fulfilled these four tasks—a complex, interrelated process—could the Buddha claim that he had attained the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi*.

Elsewhere in the canon the Buddha provides other grounds for the claim that he has attained perfect *sambodhi*, all based on his clear understanding of fundamental principles. These may be seen as alternative ways of describing penetration of the four noble truths, opening up other perspectives on the scope of this liberating knowledge. One sutta describes his *sambodhi* as understanding the gratification, danger, and escape in regard to the five aggregates. The gratification (*assāda*) consists in the pleasure and joy that arise on the basis of each aggregate; the danger (*ādīnava*), in the fact that the aggregates are all impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change; and the escape (*nissaraṇa*), in the removal of attachment to the aggregates. The Buddha then

⁹ SN V 422–23: *yāvakiṇaṅca me, bhikkhave, imesu catūsu ariyasaccesu evaṃ tiparivaṭṭaṃ dvādasākāraṃ yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ na suvisuddhaṃ ahoṣi, neva tāvāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sadevake loke samāraḷe sabrahmaḷe sassamaṇabrāhmaṇiyā pajāya sadevamaṇussāya ‘anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambuddho’ti paccaññāsiṃ. yato ca kho me, bhikkhave, imesu catūsu ariyasaccesu evaṃ tiparivaṭṭaṃ dvādasākāraṃ yathābhūtaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ suvisuddhaṃ ahoṣi, athāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sadevake loke ... ‘anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambuddho’ti paccaññāsiṃ.*

Note that in the construction *anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambuddho*, the past participle takes its cognate noun as its own object. Similarly, in the phrase *tathāgato anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambujjhati*, the indicative verb takes its cognate noun as its object. Despite the wording, what the Buddha understood beneath the Bodhi tree was not the awakening or enlightenment itself—which would be circular—but such things as the four noble truths and dependent origination.

issues a declaration that explicitly connects his attainment of *sambodhi* to an understanding of the five aggregates from these three angles:

“So long, bhikkhus, as I did not directly know as they really are the gratification as gratification, the danger as danger, and the escape as escape in the case of these five aggregates subject to clinging, I did not claim that I had attained the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi* in this world with its devas.... But when I directly knew all this as it really is, then I claimed that I had attained the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi* in this world with its devas....”¹⁰

The same template about correctly understanding gratification, danger, and escape is applied to the four material elements (SN II 170), the five spiritual faculties (SN V 204), and the world as a whole (AN I 258–59).

Another sutta about the five aggregates states that the Buddha could only claim to have attained unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi* when he had understood each of the five aggregates by way of four aspects: its content, its origin, its cessation, and the path to its cessation (SN III 58–61). Still other suttas connect the Buddha’s *sambodhi* to his discovery of the interconnections between the ten or twelve factors that make up the sequence of dependent origination, in the orders of both arising and cessation (see SN II 5–11, SN II 104–5).

These suttas make it clear that the Buddha’s attainment of unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi* involved a thorough, profound, and accurate understanding of fundamental existential matters—an understanding that culminated in the proclamation: “My liberation of mind is unshakable; this is my last birth; now there is no further existence.”¹¹ The fully purified knowledge and vision of the four noble truths, as we saw, was complex, involving twelve aspects. The liberating knowledge of the five aggregates was also complex, involving either fifteen aspects, by way of gratification, danger, and escape in regard to each of the five aggregates; or twenty aspects, by way of content, origin, cessation, and the path to cessation in regard to the aggregates. Similar kinds of complexity apply to the understanding of the four elements, the five faculties, and the world as a whole. And certainly discovering the conditional relations between the factors of dependent origination involved an extremely sophisticated and complex process of discernment.

¹⁰ SN III 28,19–31.

¹¹ At SN III 28,32–33, SN V 423,10–11: *Akuppā me cetovimutti; ayamantimā jāti; natthi dāni punabbhavo.*

At this point we might ask: “Which term, ‘awakening’ or ‘enlightenment,’ better captures the complexity and comprehensive range of the knowledge and vision that constitutes the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi*? Is that attainment best viewed as an abrupt ‘coming into awareness’ of these matters or is it better seen as ‘a state of having [or acquiring] knowledge or understanding’?”

The answer is not unequivocal. It seems that “awakening” better captures the element of *discovery* involved in the attainment of *sambodhi*, and to that extent might be justified as a rendering of the word. But “enlightenment” better conveys the depth, complexity, stability, and liberating efficacy involved in the Buddha’s consummate achievement. The Buddha did not merely “awaken” to the four noble truths; he gained a thorough, lasting, and multifaceted comprehension of them, and only on that basis could he begin his task of teaching and guiding others.

This would apply not only to the Buddha’s attainment but also, to a lesser degree, to the achievement of his disciples who reach arahantship by following the path he made known.¹² For disciples, the full realization of liberating knowledge proceeds through four stages: stream-entry, once-returning, non-returning, and arahantship. In the light of these distinctions, it may be more plausible to associate the word “awakening” with the attainment of stream-entry than with arahantship. The four Nikāyas themselves do not use the word *sambodhi* (or even *bodhi*) as a designation for stream-entry.¹³ In these collections this word seems to be confined either to the Buddha’s unique achievement of buddhahood or the attainment of arahantship by disciples. Nor do the suttas use some other Pāli word for the knowledge of stream-entry that conveys the literal meaning of “awakening.” Nevertheless, the texts do depict the attainment of stream-entry as a sudden breakthrough to the truth of the Dhamma, an initial discovery of things not known before, and in that sense this attainment might be described in English as an “awakening.”

¹² The commentaries recognize three kinds of *bodhi*, which they call *sāvaka**bodhi*, attained by a Buddha’s disciples; *pacceka**bodhi*, attained by *paccekabuddhas*; and *sabbaññitū*, “omniscience,” or *sammā sambodhi*, attained by a *sammā sambuddha*. See for instance Sv I 161,1–2, Spk II 340,29–30, and Sv-pt II 115,2.

¹³ This is in contrast with later exegetical works, such as Nidd1 456,9, which defines *bodhi* as the knowledge in the four paths: *bodhi vuccati catūsu maggesu ñāṇam*. Nidd1 481,24–25 defines *sambodhi* in the same way.

To get some sense of what this attainment involves, consider the story of the householder Upāli’s conversion to the Dhamma (MN I 379–80). Upāli had been a follower of the Jains who tried to defeat the Buddha in debate. Having crushed Upāli and won his confidence, the Buddha gives the householder a sequential discourse on his teaching that concludes with the four noble truths. Then, “just as a clean cloth, rid of stains, would perfectly take up dye, so, while Upāli was sitting in that seat, there arose in him the dust-free, spotless eye of Dhamma: ‘Whatever has the nature of origination all has the nature of cessation.’”¹⁴ Although the image used here is not one of waking up from sleep but the opening of an eye, this gain of the Dhamma-eye might reasonably be described as an awakening, as an abrupt insight into something previously unknown that sets the disciple on the irreversible path to liberation. The stream-enterer has not yet attained *sambodhi*, but is described as being “fixed in destiny, having *sambodhi* as destination” (*niyata sambodhiparāyaṇa*), bound to attain it in seven more lives at most.¹⁵

While the word “awakening” might well characterize this sudden breakthrough to the truth of the Dhamma, in my view it does not adequately represent the comprehensive and multifaceted cognition attained by the Buddha and the arahant disciples. If we go back to the definitions offered by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, that attainment, a state of profound knowledge and understanding, is better represented by the word “enlightenment.” Illustrating these stages by means of everyday experience, we might compare the attainment of stream-entry to awakening from sleep, when we open our eyes to the sound of the alarm clock, and the attainment of *sambodhi* to turning on the light after one has gotten out of bed. One “awakens” by achieving stream-entry, at which point one emerges from the somnolent condition of an ordinary worldling and arrives at the irreversible path to the final goal. Then, by attaining arahantship, one turns on the light, flooding the mind with liberating knowledge, with “enlightenment,” just as the electric light illuminates the room.

¹⁴ MN I 380,3–7. *Seyyathāpi nāma suddhaṃ vatthaṃ apagatakāḷakaṃ sammadeva rajanaṃ paṭiggaṇḥeyya, evameva upālissa gahapatissa tasmīṃyeva āsane virajaṃ vītamalaṃ dhammacakkhuṃ udapādi: “Yaṃ kiñci samudāyadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ”ti.*

¹⁵ *Sattakkhattuṃparamatā*. See SN II 133–38.

2. The verb *budh* and its derivatives

The case for using “awakening” rather than “enlightenment” as a rendering of *bodhi* often rests on the argument that the verbal root on which the noun is based, *budh*, means “to awaken, to wake up.” I quoted Norman earlier, who writes that “the root means literally ‘to wake up,’ ... and ‘awakening’ would be a more literal translation of *bodhi*.” Numerous other authors as well who use “awakening” for *bodhi* and “Awakened One” for *buddha* base their renderings on the premise that these are more faithful to the literal meaning of the words than the alternatives, “enlightenment” and “Enlightened One.”

But is it actually the case that *budh* necessarily means “to awaken” and that its derivatives are intended to convey the idea of awakening, either literally or figuratively? If we examine the various usages of words derived from *budh* in the Pāli Canon and its commentaries, it would become clear that “to awaken” is only one meaning of this verb and not at all the one most prominent in these texts. In fact, I have not been able to locate in the Nikāyas any occurrences of unprefixing verbs based on *budh* that have the literal meaning of “awakens.”

But before we turn to the suttas, let’s first see what grammars and dictionaries have to say about this family of words. The *Saddanīti*, a Pāli grammar composed in Myanmar in the twelfth century, by an erudite monk named Aggavaṃsa, explains the root *budh* thus:¹⁶

*budha avagamane. avagamanam jānanam.*¹⁷

budh in [the sense of] understanding. Understanding is knowing.

After listing words based on the root *budh*, in the same section the *Saddanīti* explains the meaning of *buddha* as “one who understands the truths, one who causes the population to understand, or else one who has known everything that can be known with wisdom ripened by the *pāramitās*.”¹⁸ For the word *bodhi*, the relevant explanations that it offers are: (1) the path, because of the statement that “the knowledge in the four paths is called *bodhi*,” and

¹⁶ I am thankful to Bryan Levman for providing me with scans of passages from Helmer Smith’s edition of the *Saddanīti* and for discussing the meaning of these passages with me in correspondence.

¹⁷ Smith 481,25 (§1132). For the Myanmar version, see CST 4, *Saddanītipparāṇa* (*Dhātumālā*), 228.

¹⁸ Smith 481,28–482,1: *Tatra buddho ti “bujjhitaṃ saccānīti buddho, bodhetā pajāyāti buddho,” atha vā pāramitāparibhāvitāya paññāya sabbampi ñeyyaṃ abujjhīti buddho.*

(2) the omniscient knowledge, because of the statement that “the one of excellent vast wisdom reached *bodhi*.”¹⁹ In both instances, *bodhi* is equated with a type of *ñāṇa*, “knowledge,” and no connection is made with the idea of “awakening.”

In the next section, the *Saddanīti* analyzes the root *budh* in the sense of *bodhana*, which can mean either “understanding” or “leading to understanding.”²⁰

*budha bodhane. Sakammakākamako’yaṃ dhātu. Tathā hi bodhanasadduccāraṇena jānanaṃ vikaṣanaṃ niddakkhaya ca gahito, tasmā “budha ñāṇe, budha vikaṣane, budha niddakkhaye” ti vuttaṃ hoti. Bujjhati bhagavā dhamme, bujjhati pabujjhati padumaṃ, bujjhati pabujjhati puriso, buddho pabuddho, bodheti, pabodheti iccādīni.*²¹

Budh in [the sense of] *bodhana*. This root is both transitive and intransitive. Thus by the utterance of the word *bodhana*, “knowing, blossoming, and the ending of sleep” are included. Therefore, it is said: “*Budh* in the sense of knowledge, *budh* in the sense of blossoming, *budh* in the sense of the ending of sleep.” The Blessed One understands phenomena; the lotus blooms, blossoms; a man wakes up, awakens; woken up, awakened (or understood, realized); causes to wake up (or: causes to understand), causes to awaken (or: causes to realize),” and so forth.²²

¹⁹ Smith 482,12–14: “*Catūsu maggesu ñāṇan*” *ti āgataṭṭhāne maggo. “Pappoti bodhiṃ varabhūri sumedhaso” ti āgataṭṭhāne sabbaññutañāṇaṃ.*

²⁰ Following Cone 2020: 596.

²¹ Smith 483,24–29 (§1133). For the Myanmar edition, see CST 4: *Saddanītippakaraṇa (Dhātumālā)*, 230.

²² I translate in accordance with the punctuation of Smith’s edition. The punctuation in the Myanmar edition differs. Smith has the causative form of the last two verbs, whereas the Myanmar edition has *bodhati*, *pabodhati*. I take it that these examples should be divided into five sets: the first, with the Buddha as subject, has the transitive verb with *dhamme* as object; the second has *padumaṃ* as subject with two intransitive verbs; the third has *puriso* as subject with two intransitive verbs; the fourth has two past participles, which are ambiguous and can mean either “woken up, awakened” or “understood, realized”; and the last set has two causatives, which are also ambiguous, either “wakes up, awakens” or “causes to understand, causes to realize.”

According to this explanation, awakening from sleep is a possible meaning of *budh*, but a meaning subordinate to that of knowledge. Even though the *Saddanāṭi* admits meanings of *budh* that convey the idea of waking up, these are differentiated from the meaning that applies in the case of the Buddha’s *bodhi*, which is that of understanding, knowing, or realizing.

In his *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Monier-Williams lists as possible meanings of *budh* and the derivative verbs: “to wake up, be awake; to observe, heed, attend to; to perceive, notice, learn, understand, become aware of; to know to be, to recognize as.” Apte, in his *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, lists “to wake up, awake” *sixth* among possible meanings of *budh*. In first place he has “to know, understand, comprehend,” and in second place “to perceive, notice, recognize.”

In the new *Dictionary of Pāli*, Margaret Cone gives four meanings for the verb *bujjhati*, citing copious examples of each meaning from the texts: (1) realizes, becomes or is aware of, recognizes; (2) understands; (3) realizes, understands, the true nature of the world of experience, understands *saṃsāra* and the way to release from it; and (4) wakes, opens, blooms.²³ As can be seen, the sense of “wakes up” comes in the fourth place. She cites only a few texts illustrating this last meaning, none from the Nikāyas themselves. For the past participle, *buddha*, she has “who has great understanding, wise ... esp. who has understood the true nature of the world of experience, who has understood *saṃsāra* and the way to release from it.”²⁴

It is obvious from such a varied list of meanings that, whatever connection *budh* and its derivatives may have with the idea of awakening, this is a secondary sense of the word. What unites the various words based on *budh* is the idea of *being aware*, of *being cognizant*. In the Pāli texts, the primary meaning of *budh* in most ordinary usages is not “to awaken” but “to understand, to know directly, to realize.”

A brief survey of the verb and its derivatives as used in conventional discourse, without reference to higher spiritual attainments, will confirm this. Here I offer a few examples of the non-technical use of the verb *bujjhati*, with the Pāli followed by my own translation. In each case I highlight the English word that renders *bujjhati*.

²³ Cone 2020:588–89.

²⁴ Cone 2020:590.

littam paramena tejasā, gilamakkham puriso na bujjhati.
(DN II 349,4–5)

The dice is smeared with intense burning [poison],
but the person swallowing it does not *know* this.

suṇoti na vijānāti, āloketi na passati;
dhammasmiṃ bhaññamānasmiṃ, attham bālo na bujjhati.
(SN I 198,32–33)

He listens, but does not understand;
he looks, but does not see.
When the Dhamma is being spoken,
the fool does not *understand* the meaning.

sārattā kāmabhogesu, giddhā kāmesu mucchitā,
atisāraṃ na bujjhanti, migā kūṭaṃ va oḍḍitaṃ.
(SN I 74,10–11)

Smitten with pleasures and wealth,
greedy, dazed by sensual pleasures,
they do not *realize* they’ve gone too far
like deer [that enter] the trap laid out.

atha pāpāni kammāni, karaṃ bālo na bujjhati;
sehi kammehi dummedho, aggidaḍḍho va tappati.
(Dhp 136; see too Th 146)

But while doing evil deeds,
the fool does not *know* [this].
The witless one is burned by his own deeds,
like one burned by fire.

te abhāvitakāyā samānā abhāvitasīlā abhāvitacittā
abhāvitapaññā abhidhammakathaṃ vedallakathaṃ kathentā
kaṇhadhammaṃ okkamamānā na bujjhissanti.
(AN III 107,1–5)

Those [monks of the future] who are undeveloped in body,
conduct, mind, and wisdom, while engaging in talk on the

Abhidhamma, in miscellaneous talk, will slip into a dark Dhamma but will not *realize* it.

Still more passages could be cited to support my point, but these should suffice to make it clear that *bujjhati* does not necessarily mean “awakens,” which is in Pāli actually a secondary meaning of the verb. In each of the passages cited, to translate *bujjhati* as “awakens,” though possible, would strain ordinary English usage. Here, the sense of “directly knows, understands, realizes” is far more natural and appropriate. But if *bujjhati*, in these commonplace contexts, can bear this meaning, it seems reasonable to suppose that in relation to the exalted achievement of the Buddha and his arahant disciples, *bodhi*, the noun based on this verb, should mean “deep knowledge, comprehensive understanding, true realization.” This accords with the definition of *bodhi* that Cone offers in her multi-volume *Dictionary of Pāli*. In the sense relevant to this discussion she defines *bodhi* as: (1) “the supreme understanding by which a man becomes a *buddha*; the understanding of the true nature of the world of experience, of *saṃsāra* and the way to release from it; the omniscience of a *buddha*”; and (2) “that understanding gained by an *arhat*.”²⁵ In my view, “enlightenment” captures these senses far more successfully than “awakening.”

Verbs and verbal derivatives from the root *budh* do occur in the Nikāyas with the literal meaning of “to awaken,” but in such cases they are formed with a prefix, either *paṭi* or *pa*. Thus it is said that one who has mastered the mind-liberation of loving-kindness “awakens happily” (*sukhaṃ paṭibujjhati*; at AN IV 150,13, and AN V 342,6). One who has seen beautiful scenery in a dream, having awakened, does not see anything (*so paṭibuddho na kiñci passeyya*; at MN I 365,31).²⁶ The same verb, *paṭibujjhati*, is used elsewhere in a context where it best corresponds to the English word “recognizes” rather than “awakens.” Thus in a sutta on “future dangers” (at AN III 105–6) the Buddha warns the monks: *tāni vo paṭibujjhitabbāni; paṭibujjhitvā ca tesam pahānāya vāyamitabbam*; “those [dangers] should be recognized by you, and having recognized them, you should strive to abandon them.”

²⁵ Cone 2020:596.

²⁶ See too Sn 807: *supinena yathāpi saṅgataṃ, paṭibuddho puriso na passati*; “having awakened, a person does not see what was encountered in a dream.”

In several places we find a derivative of *budh* with the prefix *pa* used figuratively to mean “awakens,” in contrast with those who are figuratively said to be asleep:

yesaṃ dhammā appaṭivīditā, paravādesu nīyare;
suttā te na ppabujjhanti, kālo tesam pabujjhitaṃ.
 (SN I 4,4–5)

Those who have not penetrated things,
 who may be led into others’ doctrines—
 asleep, they do not awaken:
 it’s time for them to awaken.

In this verse it is not clear whether the infinitive *pabujjhitaṃ* means “to awaken” in the sense of attaining *bodhi* or simply “to recognize,” to see one’s own heedlessness, arouse a sense of urgency, and begin walking the Buddha’s path. Given that the people referred to have not even started to engage with the practice, the latter seems a more cogent interpretation.

It remains a question whether the simple verb *bujjhati* (or its derivatives) is ever used in the Nikāyas to mean “awakens” in the literal sense. I have not been able to locate any such occurrences, and Cone does not give any in her comprehensive dictionary. In any case, since the simple verb often occurs in conventional discourse in the ordinary, non-technical sense of “know, understand, realize,” with no implication of “waking up,” there is no justification for insisting that, in relation to the Buddha’s exalted attainment, *bodhi* must convey the sense of “awakening” to the Dhamma. In this context, its usage is better matched in translation by the meanings it bears in conventional discourse in the passages cited above, that is, as understanding and direct perceptual knowledge, though at a higher level—precisely the sense conveyed by “enlightenment.”

To further support my contention that words based on *budh* need not imply the sense of awakening, let us consider another word derived from this root that has no overtones at all of awakening, not even figuratively. This is the noun *buddhi*. The word occurs in mainstream Indian philosophy and psychology as well as in Buddhist texts. Monier-Williams, in his *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, defines *buddhi* as “the power of forming and retaining conceptions and general notions, intelligence, reason, intellect, mind, discernment, judgment.” Strangely, while the word is so close to *buddha*, it is seldom found in the Nikāyas. The few places where it does occur regularly—the *Jātakas* and the *Apadāna*—are likely somewhat later than the oldest strata of the Sutta Piṭaka.

The meanings listed by Monier-Williams are relevant to the sense of *buddhi* as found in the Pāli canonical texts and commentaries. One such occurrence is in the *Lakkhaṇa Sutta* of the Dīgha Nikāya, where *buddhi* occurs among a group of desirable qualities that the future Buddha sought to promote in others (DN III 165,11–12):

*saddhāya sīlena sutena buddhiyā,
cāgena dhammena bahūhi sādhuhi.*

With faith, good behavior, learning, *intelligence*,
generosity, righteousness, and many [other] good qualities.

The word appears too in the *Theragāthā* (v. 75), ascribed to a monk named Susārada:

*sādhu suvihitāna dassanaṃ, kaṅkhā chijjati buddhi vaḍḍhati;
bālam pi karonti paṇḍitaṃ, tasmā sādhu sataṃ samāgamo.*

Excellent is it to see the well disposed; doubt is cut off,
intelligence grows. They make even the fool turn wise; therefore
it is excellent to meet good persons.

In both passages, *buddhi* apparently represents a disposition of character, akin to faith and generosity, and thus might be seen as the intellectual acuity needed to grasp matters pertaining to the moral and contemplative life. This nuance is best conveyed by the word “intelligence,” though intelligence with a moral and spiritual orientation. In this respect *buddhi* differs from *bodhi*, which is a specific spiritual attainment rather than a capacity. It would hardly make sense to translate *buddhi* as “awakening,” despite its origins in a root that sometimes means “to awaken.” We might perhaps take *buddhi* to be the faculty needed to arrive at the experience of *bodhi*, that is, as the spiritual intelligence capable of grasping liberating truth.

This interpretation is borne out by the commentaries, which include *buddhīcariyā*—the practice of intelligence—among the prerequisites for attaining buddhahood. It is said that during his career as a bodhisattva, while fulfilling the *pāramīs*, the future Buddha had to reach the pinnacle in the practice of intelligence before he could attain buddhahood.²⁷ The Dīgha Nikāya subcommentary subsumes *buddhīcariyā* under “the perfection of wisdom”

²⁷ Ud-a 134,8–9: *buddhīcariyaṃ paramakoṭiṃ pāpetvā anuttaraṃ sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambujji.*

(*paññāpāramī yeva*), explaining it to mean “the practice of knowledge by way of knowing the operation of kamma, acquaintance with blameless occupations and sciences, acquaintance with the aggregates and sense bases, etc., and investigating the three characteristics.”²⁸

The *buddhicarita*, the intelligent temperament, is one of the six character types in the scheme adopted by the *Visuddhimagga* (Vism 101–8), the type distinguished by prominence of wisdom (*paññavā buddhicarito*). The qualities typical of such a person include openness to advice, associating with good friends, moderation in eating, mindfulness and clear comprehension, and wisely directed endeavor. Again, these all support the interpretation of *buddhi* as a character trait, in contrast with *bodhi*, which is the event of acquiring supreme knowledge, understanding, or realization, or the knowledge so acquired.

The point I wish to make in referring to these sources is that the word *buddhi* is also derived from the root *budh* and the verb *bujjhati*, yet has no connection to the idea of “awakening.” If that is the case with this word, there is no cogent reason to insist that *bodhi* and *buddha* must figuratively convey the idea of “waking up.” If we can translate *buddhi* as “intelligence” or “a capacity for understanding,” then we can take *bodhi* as the act or process of understanding that culminates in transcendent liberation.

3. Metaphors and Imagery

The Pāli suttas abound not only in doctrinal expositions, dialogues, analysis, and practical instructions, but also in similes, metaphors, and word plays dazzling in their diversity and vivacity. Now if the Buddha had used the words *bodhi* and *buddha* to indicate that his liberating realization was one of “awakening,” we would expect to find the Nikāyas abounding with similes and metaphors that illustrate his attainment of *anuttarā sammā sambodhi* as an act of waking up from sleep. Similarly, we would also expect to find the state of ignorance to be compared to sleep. Yet, contrary to these expectations, it is hard to locate in the Nikāyas even a single passage that unambiguously uses the imagery of waking up to represent the Buddha’s attainment of *bodhi*, or a single passage that unambiguously uses the imagery of sleep to represent the state of ignorance. Rather, the imagery used to illustrate the Buddha’s realization of *bodhi* centers

²⁸ Sv-pt I 131,15–20: *kamassakatāññāvasena, anavajjakammāyatanavijjāṭṭhānaparicaya-vasena, khandhāyatanādīparicayavasena, lakkhaṇattayatīraṇavasena ca ñānacāro buddhicariyā.*

around light, luminosity, and radiance, and the imagery used to characterize ignorance and delusion is that of darkness. These images occur repeatedly and abundantly, which entails that we must look at *bodhi* as suggesting “the light of knowledge” rather than a metaphorical waking up from sleep.

As a precaution against misunderstanding, I must make it clear that the root *budh* and the words derived from it in no way denote the ideas of “light” or “illumination.” There is no etymological connection in Pāli between such words as *bodhi* or *buddha* and the various words that signify light—*āloka*, *pabhā*, *obhāsa*, and so forth. Similarly, while the English word “enlightenment” is based on the word “light,” the sense of light inherent in the word serves merely as a metaphor for the illumination of the mind by understanding and does not entail an inner vision of light.

There seems, however, to be a universal tendency cutting across cultures to depict the acquisition of knowledge by means of imagery that evokes the idea of light. In English this connection is established by actually embedding the word “light” in “enlightenment” in whatever way that word is used. In the Nikāyas, though the words for “light” and “knowledge” are not etymologically related, the connection between them is consistently established by means of imagery and metaphor. This confirms, to my mind, that the translation of *bodhi* as “enlightenment” is more faithful to the imagistic dimension of the Nikāyas than “awakening.”

Let me now cite some examples from the texts that support this suggestion. The standard canonical account of the Buddha’s attainment of *sambodhi* explains it as the acquisition of three kinds of clear knowledge (*vijjā*): the recollective knowledge of his own past lives, the knowledge of how beings pass away and take rebirth in accordance with their kamma, and the knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas*, the primordial defilements that bind the mind to the cycle of repeated birth and death. Each knowledge is said to have occurred during a different watch of the night. Significantly, the acquisition of each knowledge is depicted by the image of light dispelling darkness. Thus, at the conclusion of the third knowledge, the knowledge of the destruction of the *āsavas*, the Buddha declares: “This was the third clear knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and clear knowledge arose, *darkness was banished and light arose*, as happens in one who abides diligent, ardent, and resolute.”²⁹

²⁹ MN I 23,25–28: *ayaṃ kho me, brāhmaṇa, rattiyā pacchime yāme tatiyā vijjā adhigatā, avijjā vihatā vijjā uppannā, tamo vihato āloko uppanno, yathā taṃ appamattassa ātāpino pahitattassa viharato*. See too MN I 117,19–22, MN I 249,18–21, AN IV 179,8–11.

Following the attaining of *sambodhi*, the newly enlightened Buddha contemplated dependent origination in direct and reverse order. Thereupon he recited “an inspired utterance” (*udāna*), in which he uses the image of the rising sun to illustrate his attainment:

*yadā have pātubhavanti dhammā, ātāpino jhāyato brāhmaṇassa,
vidhūpayam tiṭṭhati mārasenam, suriyo va obhāsayaṃ antalikkhaṃ.*
(Ud 3; Vin I 2)

When indeed things become clear
to the ardent meditating brahmin,
he stands dispersing Māra’s army,
like the sun lighting up the sky.

The next major event in the Buddha’s career took place at Bārāṇasī, where he “set in motion the wheel of the Dhamma” by expounding the four noble truths in three phases and twelve aspects, as we saw above. Citing each of these aspects in turn, he says: “In regard to things unheard before, the eye arose in me, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, clear knowledge arose, light arose.”³⁰ We here see the three cognitive terms—*ñāṇa*, *paññā*, and *vijjā*—associated with two metaphorical terms, *cakkhu*, the “eye” with which one sees the four noble truths, and *āloka*, the “light” of knowledge that illuminates the truths. It was the clear knowledge and vision of the four noble truths in these twelve aspects that entitled the Buddha to claim that he had attained the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi*.

Toward the very end of the *Dhammacakka-ppavattana Sutta*, after the deities have applauded the Buddha for setting in motion the wheel of the Dhamma, the narrator reports that “a measureless great radiance appeared in the world, surpassing the divine majesty of the gods.”³¹ This again suggests light as the most fitting symbol for the perfect *sambodhi* of the Buddha. In fact, another sutta tells us that such a “measureless great radiance” occurred along with his attainment of *sambodhi* itself (at AN II 131,15–16).

In his relationship to the world, the Buddha is depicted not as one who wakes people up from sleep, but as one who dispels darkness by shedding light, that is,

³⁰ SN V 422.

³¹ SN V 424,5–7: *appamāṇo ca ulāro obhāso loke pāturahosi atikkamma devānaṃ devānubhāvaṃ.*

the light of wisdom. We are told that there are four kinds of light—the light of the moon, the light of the sun, the light of fire, and the light of wisdom—and the foremost of these is the light of wisdom (AN II 139,25–28). The last is the light that the Buddha provides: “The sun shines by day, the moon shines by night, the warrior shines in his armor, the brahmin shines in meditation; but all day and night, the Buddha shines with splendor” (Dhp 387).

A sutta in the *Sacca-samyutta* states that before the sun and moon arise in the world, sheer darkness prevails, but when they arise they produce a manifestation of great light and radiance, dispelling all darkness and gloom. The same holds by analogy with the Buddha:

When the Tathāgata arises in the world, the Arahant, the Sammā Sambuddha, then there is the manifestation of great light and radiance; then no blinding darkness prevails, no dense mass of darkness. Then there is the explaining, teaching, proclaiming, establishing, disclosing, analyzing, and elucidating of the four noble truths.³²

The stock expression of appreciation uttered whenever an inquirer is won over after listening to a discourse by the Buddha again brings in a simile involving light. The new disciple states: “Master Gotama has made the Dhamma clear in many ways, as though he were ... holding up a lamp in the darkness for those with eyesight to see forms.”³³

Texts that describe the Buddha as a light-maker (*pabhaṅkara*), a source of radiance, recur often, most prominently in verse. Thus we read:

*yadā ca buddhā lokasmim uppajjanti pabhaṅkarā,
te’maṃ dhammaṃ pakāsentī dukkhūpasamaḡāmināṃ.*
(AN II 52,25–26)

When the buddhas, the makers of light, arise in the world they illuminate this Dhamma that leads to the stilling of suffering.

³² SN V 443,10–15: *yato ca kho, bhikkhave, tathāgato loke uppajjati arahaṃ sammāsambuddho, atha mahato ālokassa pātubhāvo hoti mahato obhāsassa. neva andhatamaṃ tadā hoti na andhakāratimisā. atha kho catunnaṃ ariyasaccānaṃ ācikkhaṇā hoti desanā paññāpanā paṭṭhapanā vivaraṇā vibhajaṇā uttānikammaṃ.*

³³ For instance, at MN I 290,5–7: *andhakāre vā telapajjotaṃ dhāreyya, cakkhumanto rūpāni dakkhanṭīti. evamevaṃ bhotā gotamena anekapariyāyena dhammo pakāsīto.*

In the *Yakkha-samyutta* a young spirit praises the Buddha to his mother:

esa devamanussānaṃ, sammūlhānaṃ pabhaṅkaro;
Buddho antimasārīro, dhammaṃ deseti cakkhumā.
 (SN I 210,22–23)

He is the light-maker for bewildered devas and humans;
 the Buddha, bearing his last body, possessing eyes, teaches the
 Dhamma.

It is not only the Buddha himself who is said to be a maker of light. The arahant disciples are also said to be light-makers. The *Itivuttaka* says that those monks accomplished in conduct, concentration, wisdom, liberation, and the knowledge of liberation, who teach, encourage, inspire, and delight others with their teaching, can be called “dispellers of darkness, makers of light, makers of luminosity, makers of lanterns, torchbearers, makers of radiance.”³⁴

If *sambodhi* is understood as “awakening,” and the Buddha as “an awakened one,” then it would follow that ignorance (*avijjā, moha*) should be compared to sleep, and the Buddha’s task would be to wake others up from the sleep of ignorance. As Rupert Gethin, quoted above, puts it: “In contrast to these Buddhas or ‘awakened ones’ the mass of humanity, along with the other creatures and beings that constitute the world, are asleep—asleep in the sense that they pass through their lives never knowing and seeing the world ‘as it is.’” While sleep seems a fitting symbol for ignorance, somewhat surprisingly we do not find in the Nikāyas clear-cut passages that describe ignorance as a state of sleep. Rather, when ignorance is represented symbolically, it is depicted as a state of darkness.

Thus in the stock description of his *sambodhi*, quoted above, the Buddha says: “Ignorance was banished and clear knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose.” The sutta that compares the Buddha to the sun and moon says that his arising in the world drives away darkness and gloom. The *Itivuttaka* compares delusion to blinding darkness, and one who destroys ignorance to the rising sun that dispels darkness.³⁵ In the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, too,

³⁴ It 108,6–9: *tamonudā ti pi vuccanti, ālokarātipi vuccanti, obhāsarātipi vuccanti, pajjotakarā ti pi vuccanti, ukkādhārā ti pi vuccanti, pabhaṅkarā ti pi vuccanti.*

³⁵ It 84,27–28: *andhatamaṃ tadā hoti, yaṃ moho sahate naraṃ. mohaṃ vihanti so sabbam, ādicco v’udayaṃ tamaṃ.*

when disciples attain arahantship, they often describe their experience, not as a waking up from sleep, but as “splitting the mass of darkness.”³⁶

Generally in the Nikāyas, when the imagery of sleep is used, it symbolizes, not the state of ignorance, but heedlessness and laziness, and it is then contrasted, not with *bodhi*, but with heedfulness (*appamāda*) and wakefulness (*jāgariya*). The *Dhammapada* (v. 29) says that the wise person is “heedful among the heedless, wakeful among those asleep” (*appamatto pamattesu, suttesu bahujāgaro*). Another verse says that death carries off one with a mind of attachment as a deluge carries off a sleeping village (Dhp 47). The *Uṭṭhāna Sutta* (at Sn 333) exhorts disciples to rise up and cast off sleep, for sleep (that is, heedlessness) is useless while one is still stricken with the darts of defilements.

4. Some Ambiguities

Although I said above that it is hard to find even a single passage in the Nikāyas that unambiguously uses the imagery of waking up to illustrate the Buddha’s attainment of *bodhi*, there are two passages that may involve a word play between *bodhi* and waking up. One is the verse cited above that uses the verb *pabujjhanti* (in the negative) to describe “those who have not penetrated things.” In the counterpart verse that follows, “those who have penetrated things well” (*yesaṃ dhammā suppaṭivīditā*) are called *sambuddhā* who, through correct knowledge, “walk evenly amidst the uneven.”³⁷ It is possible that here *sambuddhā* is part of a word play that contrasts these “awakened ones” with the others who have not penetrated things and are therefore said to be asleep. This, however, is far from certain, and *sambuddhā* may have been used simply in the sense of “those who have become enlightened” without intending a contrast between “awakened ones” and those asleep.

The second ambiguous example is found in the *Māra-samyutta*. The Buddha has spent much of the night pacing back and forth in the open air. As dawn arrives he enters his dwelling and lies down, intending to sleep. Just then Māra appears and ridicules him for sleeping after the sun has risen. The Buddha replies: “With the destruction of all objects of attachment, the Buddha sleeps. What is that to you, Māra?”³⁸ Here, too, it is possible the Buddha is saying that

³⁶ For example, *tamokhandho padālito* at Th 128. See too Th 627 and Thi 3, 28, 44, 120, 174

³⁷ SN I 4,6–7: *te sambuddhā sammadaññā, caranti visame samaṃ*. See too the sutta that follows this one, which differs only in a single word.

³⁸ SN I 107,25–26: *sabbūpadhiparikkhayā buddho soppati kiṃ tav’ettha māra*.

as an Awakened One, who has eliminated all attachments, he is entitled to sleep after sunrise. But seeing a contrast here between “awakened” and sleep may be reading more into the verse than is intended. The Buddha may simply be referring to himself by his familiar title, without positing a contrast between his status of being “awakened” and his sleeping at dawn.

It is in the commentaries that we find occasional attempts made to draw out from the words *bodhi* and *buddha* the nuance of being “awake.” Such passages, however, should not be used to claim that these words, as used in the canonical texts, intentionally conveyed this meaning. One of the methods of the commentaries, in its analysis of terms, is to elicit from the word being examined all its possible implications, whether these are actually intended by the original or not. Such explications often rely on fanciful word plays, such as we also find in canonical texts.³⁹

When commenting on the word *bujjhati*, the commentaries, in a stock passage, draw out a meaning related to waking up:⁴⁰

bujjhatī ti kilesasantānaniddāya uṭṭhahati, cattāri vā ariyasaccāni paṭivijjhati, nibbānam eva vā sacchikarotī ti vuttam hoti.

bujjhati: what is meant is that one rises up from the sleep of the continuum of defilements, or one penetrates the four noble truths, or one realizes nibbāna itself.

Although this explanation of *bujjhati* provides three alternatives, we can discern here a progression of increasing depth. The most elementary stage is rising up from the sleep of defilements, which might be seen as the initial step in arriving at *bodhi*; the next step is the penetration of the four noble truths, the cognitive act entailed by *bodhi*; and the third step is the realization of nibbāna, the result that follows when the four truths are fully penetrated.

The commentary to the *Mahā-niddesa* also draws a connection between *buddha* and awakening:⁴¹

cittasaṅkokakara-dhammappahānena niddāya vibuddho puriso viya sabbakilesaniddāya vibuddhattā buddho ti.

³⁹ See the etymologies of the *Sabhiya Sutta* (Sn 3.6) for a good example of canonical word plays.

⁴⁰ The same passage is found at Ps I 83,13–15, Spk III 138,16–18, and in still other commentaries.

⁴¹ Nidd1-a 441,32–34.

Just as a person awakens from sleep by abandoning the factors that constrict the mind, so one is a buddha by having awakened from the sleep of all defilements.

The *Mahā-niddesa* itself, however, in its detailed explanation of the word *buddha*, uses two agent nouns derived from the root *budh*, *bujjhītā* and *bodhetā*. The former is based on the simple verb *bujjhati*, the latter on the causative *bodheti*. Here is a translation:

He is a buddha as one who understands (*bujjhītā*) the truths, as one who causes the population to understand (*bodhetā*); as all-knowing, as all-seeing, as not being guided by others, as one who has blossomed, as one whose *āsavas* are destroyed, as one without defilements, as one utterly devoid of lust, hatred, and delusion, as one utterly without defilements, as one who has gone by the one-way path, as one who attained the unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi*.... *Buddha* is a name pertaining to the end of emancipation, a designation accruing to the buddhas, the blessed ones, along with realization, with the obtaining of the omniscient knowledge at the foot of the bodhi tree.⁴²

The words *bujjhītā* and *bodhetā* might have been rendered into English as “one who has awakened to” the truths and “one who awakens” others, but those choices would not necessarily be entailed by any indication in the Pāli that the words are derived metaphorically from the idea of “waking up from sleep.” In fact, since the rest of the explanation revolves around the themes of knowing and understanding, with no suggestion that the Master was figuratively called “buddha” because he awakened from sleep, it seems highly unlikely that this idea was ever intended. The main emphasis of the passage is on the attainment of knowledge and purification as the defining marks of a buddha rather than waking up from the sleep of ignorance.

⁴² Nidd1 457–58: *bujjhītā saccānīti buddho, bodhetā pajāyāti buddho, sabbaññutāya buddho, sabbadassāvītāya buddho, anaññaneyyatāya buddho, visavitāya buddho, khīṇāsavasankhātena buddho, nirupakkilesasankhātena buddho, ekantavītarāgoti buddho, ekantavītadosoti buddho, ekantavītamohoti buddho, ekantanikkilesoti buddho, ekāyanamaggam gatoti buddho, eko anuttaram sammāsambodhiṃ abhisambuddhoti buddho... vimokkhanikametam buddhānam bhagavantānam bodhiyā mūle saha sabbaññutañānassa paṭilābhā sacchikā paññatti, yadidaṃ buddhoti.*

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to reject “awakening” point-blank as a rendering for *bodhi* or “awakened one” as a rendering for *buddha*. The choice between the two alternatives—“awakening” vs. “enlightenment,” and “awakened one” vs. “enlightened one”—depends largely on the personal predilection of the translator and the response the rendering is intended to evoke in the reader or listener. My purpose has been, rather, to dispute the claim, put forth by several recent translators and scholars, that “awakening” and “awakened one” are more faithful to the literal meaning of the original words, *bodhi* and *buddha*, and therefore that “enlightenment” and “enlightened one” are misleading renderings that should be discarded in favor of the alternatives.

This claim rests on the contention that such words as *bodhi* and *buddha*, based on the verbal root *budh*, should be rendered in accordance with the root’s meaning, “to awaken,” which such translators take to be its original sense. Against this claim, I have come to the defense of “enlightenment” for *bodhi* and “enlightened one” for *buddha*, basing my defense on three grounds. The first, which uses dictionary definitions of the alternative English words as the standard, maintains that “enlightenment” better captures the nuance of *bodhi* as it is described in a number of passages in the Nikāyas, which show that achievement to be a profound act of understanding with a comprehensive range. “Awakening,” on the other hand, as suggesting an initial flash of insight or a sudden shift in level of consciousness, serves better in my view as a way of characterizing the attainment of stream-entry than as a rendering for the *bodhi* of the Buddha and the arahants.

My second argument is that words derived from the root *budh* do not necessarily carry overtones of “to awaken” either literally or figuratively. In the Pāli Nikāyas and commentaries such words, as they are found in ordinary discourse, usually convey the simple sense of “to know directly, to understand, to realize.” A case in point is the word *buddhi*, which clearly signifies the capacity for intelligent understanding, with no nuances of “awakening” at all.

My third argument is based on the imagery—the metaphors and similes and figures of speech—used in the texts to illustrate the meaning of *bodhi*. If *bodhi* were intended to convey the sense of “awakening,” we would expect to find the Nikāyas teeming with images of the Buddha as one who has “woken up,” and of the condition he has eliminated, ignorance, compared to a state of sleep. Such imagery, however, is most conspicuous in the texts by its almost total absence.

The plain fact is that, apart from a few ambiguous passages, the Nikāyas do not depict *bodhi* as an act of awakening and ignorance as a deep sleep. Instead, the language used to depict *bodhi* and the Buddha himself draws upon images of light and radiance: the sun rising and lighting up the world, a lamp brought into a dark room, and so forth. In relation to others, the Buddha is not one who awakens them from sleep, but one who dispels darkness (*tamonuda*), who illuminates their minds with the light of knowledge, that is, one who enlightens them.

Thus, when the ascetic Gotama arrived at the Deer Park in Isipatana and claimed to be a *buddha* who had attained unsurpassed perfect *sambodhi*, it is highly unlikely that the five mendicants, his first disciples, heard him saying, “I have woken up. I have arrived at supreme awakening.” It is far more probable that they heard him saying, “I am one who has known. I have arrived at supreme knowledge.” And this supreme knowledge, this *anuttarā sammā sambodhi*, I maintain, is better represented by the English word “enlightenment” than by “awakening.”

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