

A Note on the Meaning and Reference of the Word “Pali”

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Late last year, my friend Tony Morris, who is a publisher and also a Trustee of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, persuaded me to write a short book introducing the Pali language to the general public. Under the title *Buddhism and Pali* it was published in the series *Mud Pie Slices* in Oxford shortly before Christmas.

On p.11, early in chapter 1, I state: “The word ‘Pali’ (which in Pali can also be spelled with a dot under the l: Pāḷi) is connected with a Sanskrit verbal root ‘*paṭh*’, meaning ‘recite’, and originally meant ‘text for recitation’.” Though I am aware that scholars have made many different proposals concerning the meaning and origin of this word, and few if any of them agree with me, I wrote nothing about my reasons for holding this view. This was because the book was intended for a wide public and hardly any of my readers would be able to follow my arguments. Whether or not my view about the word ‘Pali’ is correct has no bearing on the main argument (or anything else) in the book. I have therefore decided to present my justification in this statement, which will circulate separately from the book.

My justification has two parts. The first, and in my eyes the more important, is basic to my epistemology, which I learnt from Karl Popper and summarise in my *What the Buddha Thought*, pp.94 ff. As I wrote, “in an empirical subject, be it philology, history, or physics, there is no final certitude: all knowledge is provisional.” Thus, just as was the case when I wrote about the Buddha’s ideas in that book, I cannot prove that my understanding is correct; I only claim to have the best available hypothesis. Anyone who believes that they can do

better -- that they can transcend such a hypothesis and reach certitude -- is deluding themselves, because no one can. From this I conclude that anyone arguing that I am wrong should present a better hypothesis if they are to deserve a hearing. Moreover, the word we are concerned with, *pāli*, must not merely refer to something – of which, more in a moment – but also have a meaning. So presenting a good solution to this problem involves offering a plausible hypothesis about what the word means – or perhaps I should say, meant. **It must have meant something.**

On pp.85-6 of my book I discuss the word *aṭṭhakathā* and show that it contains an ambiguity: it means “telling the meaning/ purpose” of the text. So the Buddhists in those days, many centuries after the Buddha, preserved and studied the Buddha’s teaching through two bodies of text, the *pāli* and a contrasting but complementary corpus of explanations of what the *pāli* meant and what it was intended for. So what was meant by *pāli*? What the *aṭṭhakathā* explained was a body of textual material which was believed (whether correctly is not relevant) essentially to consist of the Buddha’s original words, preserved down the ages by the Saṅgha’s constant recitation.

What do the dictionaries say? Of the three main Pali dictionaries in existence, the oldest is the *Pali-English Dictionary (PED)* by Rhys Davids and Stede. Their entry begins by giving a few references to passages where *pāli* means a line or row, as of teeth in a mouth. That is the first meaning given. The second (and only other) meaning is given thus: “a line, norm, thus the canon of Buddhist writings; the text of the Pāli canon, i. e. the original text (opp. to the Commentary; thus “pāliyaṃ” is opposed to “aṭṭhakathāyaṃ” at *Vism* 107, 450, etc). It is the literary language of the early Buddhists, closely related to Māgadhī. ... The word is only found in Commentaries, not in the Piṭaka.”

I have omitted several lines giving references to secondary sources (modern scholarly discussions) and primary sources (occurrences in the texts). I shall not refer further to the comment about Māgadhī, because, as I shall show elsewhere, I think that it has already been superseded. “*Vism*” stands for *Visuddhimagga*, “The Path to Purity” by Buddhaghosa, the great commentator, so it is he who contrasts *pāli* with *aṭṭhakathā* ; the two forms quoted above are locatives.

The compilation of the second Pali dictionary by age, the *Critical Pali Dictionary* published in Copenhagen, made very slow progress and finally died before reaching **p**, so it cannot help us.

The third dictionary, which is still being written, is Margaret Cone’s *A Pali Dictionary*. When I published my book, a few months ago, this had not reached

p either. Dr. Cone has since been so kind as to send me her entry, though it will only be published later this year. The entry is extremely long. Like the *PED*, she gives two separate words *pāli*, with the same alternative spellings. The first, which I can here ignore, has two meanings: either "a dam or embankment", or "a line, a row",

The second word has a very long entry. The first meaning given, for which there is only one reference, is "a text, the words of a composition (to be learnt and recited?)". The second meaning has four sub-divisions: (i): "a passage in the *tipiṭaka*, the words of a text"; (ii): "the written text being commented on (differentiated from the commentary)"; (iii) "an alternative version of the written text"; (iv) "the text generally, the *tipiṭaka*; the teaching (differentiated from the commentary)". I think that the only significance between Margaret Cone's conclusions and mine (made before I was aware of hers) is that, having perhaps more regard to how the text was used, I make no reference to writing but instead to recitation, the main mechanism in ancient times for the text's preservation. This also fits the etymology I propose below.

Usage has guided Margaret Cone and me to our interpretation of what the word *pāli* refers to in the Pali texts, but can philology also guide us to a word in Sanskrit with a cognate meaning? If this were easy to trace, modern scholars would probably have found an answer long ago. However, with the confidence that we now know roughly what meaning we are looking for, we can suggest a series of phonetic changes which include a couple of rather unusual steps. In Sanskrit there is a verbal adjective *pāṭhya*. It is derived from the root *paṭh*, and Monier-Williams' *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* gives its meaning as "to be recited". Can *pāli* be derived from *pāṭhya*?

The work of philologists both ancient and modern has produced tables of how phonemes in Sanskrit words undergo changes as those words are taken up in the many forms of the languages directly derived from Sanskrit, which we call Middle Indo-Aryan. This went on for many centuries, and we saw above that the word *pāli* first appears in texts composed later than the *Pali Canon* (= *Tipiṭaka*). That Canon apart, not a vast amount of linguistic material has survived from those early centuries, and it is only reasonable to assume that there were phonetic developments of which we have no record – though some of them may yet turn up, e.g., in inscriptions. So we may not have direct evidence for every stage by which *pāṭhya* became *pāli*. Nevertheless, we shall see that the gaps are few.

- i. **ṭhy** is a stop followed by a **y**. The most likely development for such a consonant cluster is >**ṭhiy**, so the word would become **pāṭhiya**.
- ii. **ṭh** is cerebral, unvoiced and aspirated. What about the second consonant in *pāḷi*? It is unstable: it can be an **ḷ**, which is dental (with no dot beneath it) or cerebral (with a dot beneath it). It is voiced: for this there are parallel developments in two stages: **ṭ** > **ḍ** > **ḷ**. Geiger para.38.6: “The change of **ṭ** into **ḷ** presupposes an intermediate **ḍ**.” Of this Geiger gives several examples, to which we can add Pali *telasa* “thirteen” < Skt *trayodaśa* and Pali *soḷasa* “sixteen” < Skt *ṣoḍaśa* (Geiger para. 116.2). Finally, it is unaspirated: the aspirated cerebral **ḷ** does occur in Pali but it is very rare indeed (see Geiger para.35), so to posit a loss of aspiration over so many centuries is not farfetched.
- iii. We have thus reached a hypothetical word *pāḷiya*, which in the neuter singular would be *pāḷiyam*. Is this so different from *pāḷi* as to invalidate our hypothesis? In the *Visuddhimagga* we met *pāḷiyam*, but it was a locative, so we would have to say that *pāḷiyam*, meaning “in Pali”, has at some point been mistaken for the name of the language. This may not be a very strong argument; but I conclude by repeating that if one denies that *pāḷi* comes from Skt. *pāṭhya* and has the same meaning, one has to suggest both a more likely meaning and a more likely derivation. We await challenges.

References

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