

The Gem Set in Gold is Set in Print

by Rebecca Lemov

Many people on the first day of their first Vipassana course with S.N. Goenka—finding themselves awake at an unusual hour and sitting in an unusual place—are surprised to hear the sounds of chanting that accompany the last half-hour of the morning meditation. These sounds can be different things to different people (some are entranced, some are averse), but in almost every center outside India, most listeners will have at least one response in common: incomprehension. However mellifluous the sounds, however enchanting the voice (“Your chanting is enchanting,” Goenkaji reports a student telling him), the words themselves are, at least until recently, left untranslated.

In fact, the chanting is in two languages: at times it is Hindi, Goenkaji’s native language and the one in which he composes traditional, exhortational poems in couplets (*dohas*), which comprise a significant portion of the chanting. At other times it is Pāli, through which the Buddha’s *suttas* are conveyed in the closest surviving dialect to the language the Tathāgatha spoke.

Over ten years ago the publisher at Pariyatti, Rick Crutcher, had a seemingly simple idea: he would collect and translate the chanting from the ten-day course. Students in America and Europe had been asking over the years what the meaning was of those words: “What is he saying?” “Is it a mysterious rite of some kind?” Meanwhile, he had had the opposite experience, in India, of observing as students listened and were moved to tears by the poetry of the language. In fact, it is typical in courses in India to broadcast the *doha* chantings during morning break, while students are eating or washing their clothes. It seemed clear that these poetic expressions of Goenkaji’s teaching often have a powerful, inspirational effect on those who can understand their meaning. Perhaps Western students could, to some degree, share in this deeper understanding.

The simple idea soon became a rather more intricate undertaking. *The Gem Set in Gold*—a decade in the making, and the result of a worldwide collaboration of scholars—is the tangible result. The title refers to the metaphor Goenkaji uses to characterize the relationship between practice and theory, between the experience of sitting (*paṭipatti*) and the scholarly exploration of the Buddha’s words and systematic teachings (*pariyatti*). The gem is to practice as the Buddha taught; the golden setting is the teachings that illuminate and contextualize the practice.

An international team began with translations of the Hindi *dohas* originally done by Bill Hart in the 1980s. Researchers on opposite sides of the globe audited the recordings of Goenkaji’s chanting and worked to iron out minute variations

(depending on which recordings were being used). For the Pāli suttas from the morning chanting, scholars and Pāli students from the Vipassana Research Institute started with the text from the Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana edition of the Tipiṭaka. Consulting traditional translations available from sources in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, they painstakingly retranslated and amended the older translations to modernize the English and, at times, update the language in the light of insights from the Vipassana practice. After many rounds of review, at last all the scholarly corrections, and judgments were brought together.

Throughout, the most pressing issue was that of translation itself. An issue that all translators face is how to preserve the “feel” of the original language. A simple, literal translation is never either simple or literal – for such a translation, no matter how accurate, cannot communicate the most basic truth of the language. (Especially when the words in question are poetic, literary, or scriptural.) In translating *The Gem Set in Gold*, Indian and non-Hindi-speaking contingents debated how to communicate the truth of what was being said, the poetry of the words, without distorting them or subjecting them to personal quirks of diction.

As the literary scholar Walter Benjamin wrote in his famous essay “The Task of the Translator,” a translation is always more than a transmission. “Even a poor translator will admit [that it is] the unfathomable, the mysterious, the ‘poetic’” that any true translation aims to bring across. A translation is like a new flowering of the original, “a transformation and a renewal of something living.” “Being a special and high form of life,” Benjamin continued, “this flowering is governed by a special, high purposiveness.”

The Gem Set in Gold is the result of years of scholarly efforts to allow these words to flower anew. The result of this remarkable interchange will be published by Pariyatti and available this summer.

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