

Some Problems of Translation and Interpretation (I)

THE translation of the ideas of one language into another is sometimes done so effortlessly and in any case without much conscious acquaintance with the technique involved that it would not be incorrect to say that translation still remains an art. Even where it may involve some effort as in the case of a student of Classical Sanskrit struggling for the first time with a Vedic hymn in an attempt to translate it into English, the aim of the translator in producing a 'good' translation will be considered to have been achieved if due attention has been paid to all the known rules of grammar (morphology and syntax) in construing the words and thereby comprehending the ideas of the original and if these are appropriately conveyed through the medium of the language into which the translation is done. Technical correctness is for the most part all that is asked for and for this purpose the numerous text-books on composition will provide the thumb rules. Thus a good text-book on Pali composition (which is still a desideratum) will tell us that the Pali verb is to be spotted by its position in the sentence and by an examination of the radical element, suffix and termination of the word (after due allowance is made for the operation of the rules of phonology in the process of derivation from the Sanskrit); and that in translating it into English one gets at the sense from observing the radical element and the prefixes (if any), and (in general) the tense, mood, number and person from examining the termination and this data enables us to give the English equivalent of the verb, provided we are acquainted with English grammar as well. Likewise, it may tell us all the different forms in which questions can be asked in Pali along with the parallel equivalent forms, if any, of the English. It may also give valuable hints as to how far it is possible and practicable to preserve the style of the original in the English translations.

But the best possible translation (or series of translations) made with the guidance of the best possible work on comparative syntax is still liable to be condemned by some critics who may question the validity or adequacy of the translation on three grounds. First, there would be those who would assert that no possible translation can convey the 'spirit' of the original, meaning thereby that the richness of the words as reflected in their associations and the order and arrangement of the syllables, sentences and ideas of the original can in no way be represented, except possibly in a few parallelisms, in any possible translation, which would lack these important features. Secondly, there would be those who would say, especially if the two languages are historically far removed from each other (e.g. French and Chinese) that

SOME PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

the concepts of the one have such a different background from the concepts of the other that in spite of their being the nearest equivalents they have a different meaning and significance for the reader of the translation as compared with the reader of the original. Lastly, it will be objected, if the original is an ancient language (e.g. Vedic Sanskrit or Ancient Egyptian) that the ideas and modes of thought expressed in it are mostly probably so different from ours that a translation is of little significance, as the assigning of meanings to its symbols involves a series of inductive arguments of dubious value.

In this series of two articles we shall be concerned with some problems arising out of the second criticism and relating to the translation of the contents of the Pali Canon and the Upaniṣads. The criticism however represents only one extreme view¹, the other view being that the degree of correspondence in human ideas in spite of divergence in language is so great that differences of background are for the most part negligible. It is necessary to add that the problems concern "the scientific use of language"² where language is used to refer to matters of fact, empirical or metaphysical and not "the emotive use of language" reflected in some forms of literature in which words are used merely to arouse an emotional attitude and play on the aesthetic imagination. It is well known that in the latter case the background of the words and concepts play such an important part that translation very often defeats its purpose. But on the other hand it must be remembered that words with a 'scientific' reference sometimes have emotive values attached to them and that translation at times seriously interferes with this aspect of a word. Thus the term *nāmarūpanirodho* as an epithet of Nirvāṇa tends to evoke an attitude of approval in the reader of the Pali but the translation "the cessation of the psycho-physical individuality" is hardly likely to do so for the reader of the English. We shall now first consider what is meant by the translation of a word or sentence, examine some of the difficulties involved and then proceed to raise the problems.

In translating from one language to another what we do is to entertain and express in the sentences of the one language the propositions which have been entertained and expressed by the sentences of the other language. This does not mean that we confine our translations to sentences expressing propositions for we translate questions, commands and combinations of words intended to evoke an emotional response, as well; in which case, the process of translation consists in employing the corresponding set of words which would evoke the appropriate verbal, physical and emotional responses respectively, intended by the original.

1. B. Heimann, *Indian and Western Philosophy*; Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, p. 45.

2. Stebbing, *Modern Introduction to Logic*, p. 17.

But in general it would be granted that the unit the translator has to deal with is the sentence expressing the proposition. The process of translation then consists in first understanding that sentence *x* of language *X* expresses proposition *p* and then in stating that proposition *p* is expressed in language *Y* by sentence *y*, for when this is done sentence *y* would be deemed to be the translation of sentence *x*. Let us first examine what is involved in "understanding a sentence" which forms the first part of the process. It would generally be conceded that understanding the individual words which compose a sentence is a necessary though not a sufficient condition for understanding a sentence. Understanding a word may include a knowledge of the several empirical situations, in which the set of sounds and marks which compose the word, can be appropriately used and not used, (and in some languages) of its morphology or the changes in form that it undergoes in declension and conjugation, of its syntax or its position and relation to the other words which together with it form the sentence and of its etymology or its structural history in relation to its meaning. It may not be necessary to know some of these latter features of a word for purposes of translation but even if one does know all these facts about the individual words of a sentence one would still be at a loss to understand the meanings of certain combinations of words. Thus one may understand the words "cakkam" and "vatteti" but this by itself would not help us in knowing what is meant by "rājā cakkam vatteti" for "cakkam vatteti" does not here mean "turns the wheel" (though it is possible to mean this) but "extends his sway" or "exercises his authority" for this combination of words has in the history of the language developed this idiomatic sense. But even a knowledge of the words as well as of the idioms may not help us in understanding some sentences, the comprehension of which demands a general acquaintance with the modes of thought peculiar to the language and a special acquaintance with the context. For instance we can translate the sentence "n'atthi mātā natthi pitā" (MN. I. 515) as "there is no mother, there is no father" and we may know everything about the words which compose the sentence but it is doubtful whether we have understood the proposition expressed by the sentence. Whatever it means it is clear from the context that it does not mean to say that human beings lack parents. It is difficult to say with certainty what it means but we know that in Pali an abstract notion is generally expressed by giving a striking instance of a concrete example and that "serving ones parents (mātāpituupatṭhānam)" is listed among the social obligations in a set of ethical recommendations (Kh. 3) and as the above occurs in an enumeration of wrong views (micchādiṭṭhi) it should probably mean "the denial of obligations towards parents" and as this is a striking instance of moral and social obligations in general, the sentence probably means and should perhaps be translated as "the denial of moral obligation".

SOME PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

If the first part of the process of translation consisted in comprehending the original the second part consists in expressing in the specified language what has been comprehended. But is it possible to comprehend a proposition expressed by a sentence quite apart from the sentence? In other words, no logician for instance would deny that the English sentence "the streets are wide" and the French sentence "les rues sont larges" express the same proposition but is it possible to entertain this proposition without entertaining it in the English or French or any other particular language? Perhaps it is possible to entertain it with the help of visual images or as some psychologists may urge with imageless thoughts but it is doubtful if any complex and precise idea can be so conceived quite irrespective of the words or sentences of any particular language. If so, there is no intermediate stage in translation in which we entertain the proposition in abstract, as it were, and then seek to express it in a specified language. And as each language has modes of thought peculiar to it owing to historical and other reasons it means that in effecting the transition we cannot always substitute words for the words or ideas of the original (for this would produce combinations of words and thereby modes of thought alien to the reader of the translation even if these combinations are grammatically correct) but think in terms of the other language in producing the parallel and be content with approximations where this cannot be found. For instance if we are asked to translate the Sinhalese saying "koheda yanne malle pol" into Pali we can proceed in two ways. We can translate the set of ideas expressed by the words and form the grammatically correct Pali sentence "kuhiṃ gacchasīti puṭṭho pacchiyaṃ (or pasibbake) nāḷikeraphalānīti vyākareyya"; or we may try to think how the Pali speaker has expressed or would express the idea of somebody giving an answer which has no relevance at all to a question and find it in the Pali saying "ambaṃ vā puṭṭho labujaṃ vyākareyya". It would be seen that the latter translation has nothing in common with the individual ideas of the original but it certainly expresses its intention to the Pali reader much more eloquently than the former.

In the above analysis of the general technique of translation we asserted that the comprehension of the original was an essential part of the process but if there is a structural similarity between the two languages extending to morphology and syntax owing to a close historical affinity as between Vedic Sanskrit and Avestan or Sanskrit and Pali, a mere knowledge of the phonological rules of transformation and some of the rules of morphology will enable us to translate from one language into another without knowing either language. Thus the Sanskrit sentence "ayaṃ dharmaḥ sarveṣāṃ bhūtānāṃ madhu" can be translated into Pali as "ayaṃ dhammo sabbesaṃ bhūtānaṃ madhu" by someone who knows the phonological rules that -rm- of Sanskrit changes into -mm- of Pali under certain phonological conditions etc. even if

he does not know what the Sanskrit or Pali sentence means. Even where the affinity is remote as between English and Pali, a knowledge of the morphology and word-order of the Pali can sometimes enable us to translate from one language to the other if we are given an English-Pali Dictionary which gives the Pali parallel for the English word even if we do not understand what the English or Pali words and sentences mean. Thus given the sentence "this dog eats flesh" and being told that it is English and given an English-Pali Dictionary we look up "this" and write down "ayaṃ" and thus complete the sentence "ayaṃ sunakho khādati maṃsaṃ" but if the dictionary gave the stem form "sunakha-" for "dog" and the infinitive "khādituṃ" for "eats", it is necessary for us to recognise this fact and also know that it is a noun and verb respectively and that what is demanded is the nominative case and third singular present tense of these words respectively and also have the ability to make these changes if we are to produce the correct translation. But it is clear that such knowledge cannot easily be acquired without understanding the meanings of the words and therefore the language itself, so that there is no short cut to translation short of knowing both languages.

We have hitherto spoken of the sentence expressing the proposition as the unit of translation but we also speak of the translation of individual words. Here again, except when we can get at the philological equivalent which means the same by the application of phonological rules, it is necessary to know what the word means and look for the parallel word that means the same. We may be said to understand a word if we know both of two things; first, all the empirical situations in which the word is applied and not applied and secondly, all the sentences in which the word is correctly employed. For instance one may be said to know the word "dog" if one can recognise and apply it to a member of the canine species of animals and not apply it to other species of animals or things and also know that the sentence "the dog is larger than an ant" expresses a true proposition and the sentence "a dog is fiercer than a hare" expresses a false proposition etc. To understand a Pali word it is therefore necessary not only to understand the sentences in which the word is used but also have the capacity to indicate the empirical situations in which it is used and not used. To translate it to English it is also necessary to find the parallel word which is used in these same situations. But it is possible that there is no such parallel word because the empirical situations or objects have not existed in the history of that language or, if they existed, have been differently classified. In such circumstances the translation of the words presents difficulties, some of which we shall proceed to examine by investigating the possibilities of translating a word which presents such difficulties.

Let us consider the translation of the term "saṅkhārā" which the P.T.S. Dictionary characterises as "one of the most difficult terms in Buddhist

metaphysics” and the translation of which according to Mrs. Rhys Davids “has ever been a poser”. It is first necessary to determine what it means and this can be done by examining the term itself or by studying the contexts in which it has been used, unless we are content to follow the dictionary or commentary which tells what the compiler of each thought the word meant in terms of other words the meanings of which are already known to us. We do not deny the usefulness of these latter sources of information but let confine ourselves mainly to the primary sources. As the majority of Pali and Sanskrit words are formed from roots with prefixes and suffixes and as these are limited in number it is possible by learning these to master the greater part of the vocabulary in a comparatively short time, but the method is artificial and some of the possible combinations (e.g. *paridisati*) are not actually found in the language while those that are found may have developed new senses which are not reflected in the elements (i.e. prefixes, root and suffixes) which compose the words. We shall first study the contexts and then consider the analysis of the word itself.

Let us first examine the different shades of meaning that the word exhibits in different types of contexts, see what these have in common and then consider the possibilities of translation. If we start with a context in which its sense is fairly clear it is where the Buddha in admonishing *Koḷiyaputta* who had developed the habits of a dog for an exceedingly long time says that the performance of volitional activities of body, word or mind (*kāya*°, *vacī*° *manosañkhāraṃ abhisankharoti*) inspired by love, hate or mixed motives respectively leads to rebirth among beings who act under the influence of these same motives respectively (MN. I, 389-391). *Saṅkhāra* is here used of acts which are (a) consciously performed in which there is (b) a seeking after ends inspired by motives (c) a decision to choose certain courses of action to others and (d) the consequent activity (e) the whole of which [i.e. (a) to (d)] has a tendency to determine the kind of life of ones future existence. In this last respect [i.e. (e)] it is significant that the word used for an act of deliberation employed in doing away with the above kinds of acts which bear fruit in a next life is not *saṅkhāra* but *cetanā* (MN. I, 391). This central conception of *saṅkhāra* as an act of will is found in similar and parallel contexts (e.g. MN. III, 229; AN. I, 122, II, 231) though in some contexts some aspects of its meaning are more prominent than others. For instance, where *saṅkhārā* is used synonymously along with *cetanā* (volition), *patthanā* (aspiration) and *panidhi* (mental resolve) (AN. I, 32, V, 212) the idea of seeking after ends is in greater focus and where mention is made of morally good volitional acts (*puññābhisaṅkhārā*) and of morally evil volitional acts (*apuññābhisaṅkhārā*) (DN. III, 217; Vbh., 135) the sense of deliberate choice between alternative courses

3. The Birth of Indian Psychology, p. 321.

of action. In other contexts as for instance when mention is made of somebody warding his religious life by keeping it under control by an act of will (sasaṅkhāraniggayhavāritavato AN. I, 254) there is no specific emphasis on any particular aspect of its meaning. We shall not mention all these contexts as we are only interested in different types of contexts.

Perhaps its most crucial use is in the first two links of the 'chain of causation' in the sentences "avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā" and "saṅkhāra paccayā viññāṇam". When two concepts a and b are joined by the term "paccayā" in the Canon it is reasonable to infer that they are in a state of invariable sequence or concomitance [and are probably related by one or more of the numerous relations into which the term "paccaya" is analysed in the Canon (Paṭṭhāna) because it is a special application of the two formal principles of causal determination as stated in the formula "asmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti etc." This means that the presence of *avijjā* is followed by or is concomitant with the presence of *saṅkhārā* and the absence or cessation of *avijjā* (*avijjānirodho*) by its cessation (*saṅkhāranirodho*) and also owing to the relation of functional dependence between the two a change in the state of *avijjā* is correlated with a change in the state of the *saṅkhārā*. In other words the nature of one's volitional activities depends on the nature of one's beliefs. This is clear enough, for if I entertain the true belief that fire burns a volitional act of mine in the presence of a fire would be different from what it would be if I was not aware of this belief or held the false belief that fire does not burn. The contention of the Canon therefore seems to be that the absence of a true belief as to the nature and destiny of the individual as stated in the Four Truths and which constitutes *avijjā* (SN. II, 4) is correlated with the presence of volitional activities of a certain kind these presumably being the morally good, morally evil and steadfast volitional activities (*puñña°*, *apuñña°*, *āneñjābhisaṅkhāra*) the last of which are probably those which occur in the states of *Arūpa Jhāna* because the term *āneñja* (v.l. *ānañja*) is used in connection with them (MN. II, 229, 230, 262, 263). The cessation of the absence of true belief (*avijjānirodho*) with the knowledge of the Four Truths is likewise followed by or is concomitant with the cessation of these *saṅkhāras* (*saṅkhāranirodho*...; *Saṅkhārūpasama* Dh 368, 381; *sabbasaṅkhārasamatha* SN. I, 136, It 88, AN. I, 132) in which state the mind is said to be divested of *saṅkhāras* (*visaṅkhāragataṃ cittaṃ* Dh 154) which are these same "psychological activities" and not "material things" as Dr. Stede takes it (P.T.S. Dictionary).

The second link "saṅkhāra paccayā viññāṇam" states a similar relation between one's volitional activities and the *viññāṇa*—which may be the 'psychic factor' (to borrow a term of Prof. C. D. Broad) which survives physical death and by entering the womb helps in the development of a new individuality in

conjunction with the bio-physical factors⁴ or "the first stirring of mental life in a newly begun individual or the *paṭisandhivivānāna*" (P.T.S. Dictionary, s.v. *saṅkhāra*) or the (future) series of states of consciousness of the individual. We shall not seek to determine the sense of *viññāna* here but the sense of *saṅkhāra* here as willed actions seems to be corroborated by other contexts as well. Thus in the Discourse on Intentional Rebirth (Sankhār'uppattisutta) it is said that a man endowed with faith, virtue, learning, charity and intelligence could determine his next existence by willing to be born in some particular form of life; all he has to do after he has decided as to which form it is to be is "to entertain that thought, establish it firmly and develop it" and then "those acts of will (*te saṅkhārā*) and that life of his (*vihāro ca*) will tend to bring about his birth in that state" (MN. III, 100). The dynamic import of the term is also brought out in the use of the related term *abhisāṅkhāra* where it is said that a wheel goes on turning "only so long as the *motive force* operates" (*yāva abhisāṅkhārassa gati* AN. I, iii) or that "a preliminary act of deliberation (*pubbe ca abhisāṅkhāro* MN. I, 297) is necessary for the subsequent persistence of a certain state of trance. It is also significant that in the pictorial representation of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming⁵ (*bhavacakra*), the *saṅkhārā* are represented by "a potter with wheel and pots" and that in the Upaniḍadic parallel it is mentioned that the body driven by the Puruṣa (Person), the unchanging agent of all action, "goes round and round like the wheel driven by the potter" (Mait. Up. 2.6). Now a problem that presents itself is whether the dynamic influence of the *saṅkhārā* is an action at a distance or whether they are present during the interval and afterwards. It is necessary to remember here that the *saṅkhāras* unlike the Upaniḍadic Puruṣa are changing (*anicca*) and though they are purposive actions in that choice and seeking after ends play a part are not the product of, nor are they in themselves agents. If their action is not to be an action at a distance then a particular *saṅkhāra* must in some sense survive its actual occurrence and be present though in a state of flux and as it is not present in the state of consciousness of which the subject is aware it should be present (to use a convenient term) in his Unconscious. In mentioning this, it is not the intention of the writer to indulge in speculative psychology but to try and explain two texts one of which directly concerns the use of the term *saṅkhāra* and in which the above view seems at least to be adumbrated. We are told that one who has attained "the state of concentration free from cogitative and reflective thought (*avittakkaṃ avicāraṃ samādhi*) can by comprehending with his mind the mind of another and by observing how the mental-*saṅkhārā* are disposed in the mind of this particular individual (*mano-saṅkhārā paṇihitā imassa cittassa*") predict that he will think (*vitak-*

4. See Ceylon University Review, Vol I, No. I, pp. 57-58.

5. E. J. Thomas, History of Buddhist Thought, p. 70.

kissati) such and such a thought (amum nāma vitakkam) at a later time (AN. I. 171). As the subject is apparently not conscious of the presence of these *saṅkhārā* which subsequently determine or influence his processes of thought they are presumably not present in his consciousness when they are perceived by the exercise of the telepathic powers of the other. If in this passage we therefore find perhaps the earliest historical mention of unconscious mental processes it tends to be confirmed by another in which "the stream of Consciousness" (*viññāṇasota*) of a person (*purisassa*) is said to be present in this world (*idhaloke patiṭṭhitaṅ ca*) and also in the world beyond (*paraloke patiṭṭhitaṅ ca*) without discontinuity in both parts (*ubhayato abbhocchinnam*) (D.N. III, 105). As this is said to be so when the person is alive in this world it implies the presence of a part of the stream of Consciousness of which the person is not aware though it nevertheless exists in a state of flux. And though there is no text to confirm this, the probability is, in the light of the above two passages that this part of the stream of Consciousness consisted of these dynamic *saṅkhāras* which persisted in a state of flux in the Unconscious influencing his subsequent behaviour. This part of the stream of Consciousness which then consisted of these *saṅkhāras* is what is probably also referred to or at least formed part of "the stream of becoming" (*bhavasota* S. IV, 291, which as Dr. Wijesekera⁶ points out is probably synonymous with *viññāṇasota*) and it is interesting especially in view of the subsequent history of the word that in the earliest mention of the term *bhavaṅga* (which incidentally is not in the *Milindapañha* as stated in a past issue of this Review)⁷ in the sentence "Cattār'imāni bhikkhave aṅgāni. Katamāni cattāri? Rūpaṅgaṃ, vedanaṅgaṃ saññaṅgaṃ, bhavaṅgaṃ" (AN. II, 79), *bhava* seems to embrace both *saṅkhāra* and *viññāṇa* which would have followed *rūpa*, *vedanā* and *saññā* if the usual sequence of *khandhas* was followed. In this connection it is also worth noting that of ten things (*dhammā*) which are said to present in the body (*sarīratṭhā*) (AN. V, 88) the last is said to be *bhava-saṅkhāra* resulting in a future life (*ponobhaviko*). It is possible that the use of singular *bhava-saṅkhāro* instead of the plural *bhava-saṅkhārā* is due to the fact that all the previous words end in -o in which case it means "dynamic *saṅkhāras*" and if not, the resultant of these *saṅkhāras* namely "the disposition or will to become, resulting in a new life". If we now risk an interpretation of "*saṅkhāra paccayā viññāṇaṃ*" the one most consistent with the texts seems to be that on the nature of one's volitional activities depends the nature of that part of the Consciousness in the 'world-beyond' (*paraloke patiṭṭhitaṃ*) in which the impressions of these persist though in a state of flux and which survives physical death and helps in the formation of a new personality.

6. University of Ceylon Review, Vol. III, No. I, p. 93.

7. Vol. I, No. I, p. 96.

SOME PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

Another difficulty that one meets with is the apparently dual senses in which the terms *kāya*^o and *vacīsaṅkhārā* are used. To take the latter first we found it used in our first quotation for a volitional act performed through the instrumentality of speech (as for instance the deliberate use of harsh language). Elsewhere we are told that cogitative and discursive thought (*vitakkavicārā*) is what constitutes *vacīsaṅkhārā* "for one utters words after first cogitating and reflecting" (MN. I, 301). A closer scrutiny seems to indicate that the passages are possibly mutually explanatory for what is perhaps intended by the latter is that a speech-*saṅkhāra* consists not of a mere succession of words but of speech reactions as expressive of purposive mental activity and in suggesting that discursive thought, which constitutes this mental activity, is bound up with speech reactions foreshadows the Behaviourist view⁸ that thinking consists of implicit speech reactions or sub-vocal talking. The apparent disparity in the use of *kāya saṅkhārā* is that while it used to denote a volitional act performed through the instrumentality of the body in our first citation it is elsewhere identified with "inspiration and respiration" (*assāsapassāsā*) i.e. the process of breathing. This means that it could refer to a purely volitional act such as say beating someone with a stick or a reflex act like breathing. Here again the two acts have in common the fact that they are directed to certain ends and although only the former is a consciously willed act it must be noted that according to the Canon the latter too is under the control of the will for breathing is made to stop in the Fourth Jhāna (AN. IV, 409) and the *saṅkhāras* of the body are brought to rest in it (AN. II, 41). It is likely that breathing is mentioned only as concrete instance typifying a general class of acts namely bodily reflexes which are all brought within the control of the agent in this Jhāna. An apparent discrepancy also tends to be felt in the case of *citta-saṅkhārā* which is used in the one instance for a purely mental act of will but is also defined as "ideation (*saññā*) and feeling (*vedanā*)" because as mental states these are essentially bound up with the mind (*cittapaṭibaddhā* MN. I, 301). What is perhaps intended is not that a mental image or idea (*saññā*) or feeling (*vedanā*) is individually a *saṅkhārā* but that a mental act of volition (e.g. entertaining a thought of love in place of a thought of hate) consists in contemplating set of mental ideas or images (*saññā*) tinged with a particular hedonic tone (*vedanā*). All these three *saṅkhāras* are further classified in another context where the use of the term *saṅkhārā* for 'reflex actions' or 'unconscious habits' of body, speech and mind is shown by the fact that we can operate a *saṅkhārā* (^o*saṅkhāram* *abhisāṅkharoti*) without being aware of it (*asampajāna* AN. II, 158) while the fact that we perform it while being aware of it (*sampajāna*) does not necessarily mean that it is not a reflex action for one can breathe in or breathe out mindful of the action (DN. II, 291) though it is a reflex. Another distinction that

8. R. S. Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools of Psychology*, p. 71.

is drawn is that it can be operated on ones own initiative (*sāmaṃ . . . abhi-saṅkharoti*) or at the instigation of another (*pare*).

All the above *saṅkhāras* are brought to rest (*paṭippassaddhā*) on the attainment of *Nirvāṇa* (MN. I, 296) in this life, with the sole exception of the *āyusaṅkhārā* or the motive forces which sustain life, which are not states which could be experienced (*vedaniyā dhammā*). But that even this falls within the control of the will is seen by the fact that the Buddha when he had completed his mission is said to have let go his *āyusaṅkhāra* (DN. II, 106 = *jīvitasāṅkhāra* DN. II, 107 = *bhava-sāṅkhāra* but not *ponobhavika* DN. II, 99) which Keith rightly renders as " his disposition to live, the motive force which but for his decision would have continued to keep alive his mortal frame ". Though the *saṅkhāras* disappear with the cessation of all empirical ideation and feeling (*saññāvedayita-nirodha*) all the states of *Rūpa* and *Arūpa Jhāna* with the possible exception of the last are products of *saṅkhāras* or of purposive volitional activity (*abhisāṅkhatam abhisamceta-yitam*) (MN. I, 350-352). Now there are two ways of attaining *Nirvāṇa* one in which the aspirant passes through both the *Rūpa* and *Arūpa Jhānas* before reaching the goal and the other in which it is at least necessary to attain the First *Jhāna* but not the others (MN. I, 350 ff.). This means that one who has attained the First *Jhāna* and also attained the state of Once-Returner (*Sakadāgāmi*) can attain *Nirvāṇa* by the further exercise of volitional activities or *saṅkhāras* in developing the successive states of *Jhāna* or without doing so and it is probably these two types who are characterised as those who would attain *Nirvāṇa* without (developing more) *saṅkhāras* (*asaṅkhāraparinibbāyi*) and by (developing more) *saṅkhāras* (*sasaṅkhāraparinibbāyi*) respectively among the Once-Returners (AN. I, 231 ff.).

In all the above contexts we found that *saṅkhārā* denoted aspects of will conscious or unconscious. We are now confronted with a few contexts in which judging by the traditional interpretations and translations the use of the term is not restricted to its psychological application. In the well known statement " *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* " the usual translation of *saṅkhārā* is " component things " and the Comy. takes the word to mean *khandhā* or all the constituent factors of the personality. This sense tends to be confirmed by another definition of *saṅkhārā* where it is said (to follow Mrs. Rhys Davids' translation): " Why do you say *saṅkhāras*? Because these compose what is compound. And what is the compound they compose? They compound *rūpa* in order to *rūpa*-ness (*rūpattāya*), *vedanā* in order to *vedanā*-ness (*vedanattāya*) . . . and so on . . . " (SN. III, 86 ff.). We have here to take into account the possibility that the meaning of the word might have been forgotten at some period in the history of the Canon and an arbitrary sense attributed to it in the light of its etymology unless this is a part of the genuine meaning of the term but except for the commentarial tradition which may reflect a

SOME PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

later use of the term it is possible for these passages to be interpreted differently in the light of the contexts in which the word denotes aspects of will. Thus a parallel context to the above, "aniccā sabbe saṅkhārā . . ." (SN. I, 200) ends with the phrase "tesam vūpasamo sukho" and the verb *upa + √sam* (Skr *√śam*) as we mentioned above was what was used to denote the cessation of the "purposive psychological activities" in *Nirvāṇa* and it is reasonable to suppose that *saṅkhāra* here too means this. This sense is also indicated in the threefold classification of Ill, the Ill of pain (*dukkhadukkhatā*), the Ill of *saṅkhāra* (*saṅkhāradukkhatā*) and the Ill of change (*viparināmadukkhatā*) (SN. IV, 217) where if *saṅkhāra* meant component things it would be identical with the latter Ill while as "conative disposition" its Ill consists in causing the continuity of the individuality and thus giving rise to both the other forms of Ill, an interpretation which tends to be confirmed by the passage which says that "whatever Ill that is produced (*yam kiñci dukkhaṃ sambhoti*) is due to the *saṅkhāras* (*sabbam saṅkhārapaccayā*) and that with the cessation of the *saṅkhāras* there is no new arising of Ill" (SN. 731). The *saṅkhāras* here are no doubt the dispositions which cause the continuity of individuality. As such they mould the five constituents of the new personality including its *rūpa* (form) and its purposive behaviour (*saṅkhāras*) and it is possibly in this sense that the *saṅkhāras* are defined in the passage quoted above as "making *rūpa* what it is (*rūpam rūpattāya saṅkharoti*), *vedanā* what it is . . . the *saṅkhāras* what they are etc.". That the physical form or *rūpa* is made what it is by the *saṅkhārā* in the above sense is also shown by the passage where the body (*kāya*) is said to be a means of experiencing past karma which has been deliberately planned and performed (*abhisāṅkhatam abhisāñcetaṃ*) (AN. II, 65).

Another way of determining or confirming the meaning of a word in some stratum of thought is by deducing it from common elements of its meaning in its later history or by studying the concept in its earlier history. As for *saṅkhāra* the later schools give variant lists of *saṅkhāras*⁹ and Mrs. Rhys Davids¹⁰ is perhaps right in saying that it was a dumping ground of the results of mental analysis which could not be classified under any of the other groups but it is significant, as Dr. Thomas¹¹ observes, that these "saṃskāras are chiefly conscious and unconscious manifestations of will". As for its earlier history the word as Mrs. Rhys Davids points out¹² is "not found in pre-Buddhistic literature" but this does not mean that the concept is not found.

In looking for a similar concept in a related language we have to look for similar contexts and for a word found in these contexts whose use is similar

9. E. J. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

10. *Op. cit.*, p. 322 ff.

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 162.

12. *Op. cit.*, p. 321.

if not identical to the word in our language which stands for this concept. We seem to find this in Upaniṣadic *kratu*. We shall state the parallelisms as we find them because it illustrates the results of this mode of investigation. (1) *kratu* is used for a voluntary decision made in the pursuit of ends. As it is said "as is his desire (*kāma*), such is his resolve (*kratu*); as is his resolve such the action (*karma*) he performs". In this it resembles *saṅkhāra* with this difference that the latter term seems to include the action as well. (2) In this same passage (Bṛhad. Up. 4.4.5) which is the Upaniṣadic parallel of the Buddhist 'chain of causation' it is implied that the nature of one's resolve (*kratu*) depends on the nature of the desires (*kāma*). Now all these desires are due to the ignorance (*avidyā*) of the Absolute which is devoid of desire (*niṣkāma*) and therefore these resolutions are ultimately due to ignorance (*avidyā*) just as in Buddhism, the *saṅkhāras* were due to ignorance (*avijjā-paccayā saṅkhārā*). (3) Just as in Buddhism the habitual volitional activities determined the nature of the surviving Consciousness (*saṅkhārapaccayā viññānaṃ*) it is said that "according to the purpose (*kratu*) which a person has in this world thus does he become on departing hence" (Chānd. Up. 3.14.1). (4) And for the above reason it is said in the next sentence "let him form for himself a purpose (*kratu*)" which the dying person is said to have made a special effort to keep in mind, for in a prayer probably uttered when a man was nearing his death we find the refrain "O purpose (*kratu*), remember! The deed (*kr̥ta*), remember" (Bṛhad. Up. 5.15, Īśā Up. 17). The ostensible reason for this is that his future depended on his resolves (*kratu*) and actions (*karma*) for while action (*karma*) depended on the former "what action he performs that he procures for himself" (Bṛhad. Up. 4.4.5). The Pali parallel which we have mentioned above is where the Buddha says in the Discourse on Intentional Birth (*Saṅkhār'uppatti Sutta*) that the kind of future birth depends on one's aspirations (*saṅkhārā*) and mode of life (*vihāro*). In this respect it is also interesting to compare the close parallel between *kratu* and *karma* and *saṅkhāra* and *kamma*. (5) The state of final emancipation is described in the Canon as the cessation of the purposive activities (*saṅkhāranirodho*) and the person who is thus emancipated may be described as "niruddha-saṅkhāro"—though this word is not actually found unlike in the case of e.g. *khīnāsavo* and *āsavakkhaya*. Similarly the Absolute, with which one becomes identified on attaining salvation according to the main orthodox theory of Upaniṣadic religion, is described as being "without purposive will" (*akratuḥ*, Śvet. Up. 3.20 c). (6) In the Upaniṣads it is said that "a person verily consists of purposes (*kratumaya*, Chānd. Up. 3.14.1) while in the Canon "the person" (*ayaṃ*) is said to be "a mere assemblage of reflexes-and-dispositions or purposive activities (*suddha-saṅkhāra-puñja*)" (SN. I, 135). (7) Lastly the two words have a common radical element *kr̥* (*kratu* = $\sqrt{kr̥} + tu$; *saṅkhāra* = *saṃ* + (*s*) + *kr̥* + *a*) and are therefore etymologically related and it is worth noting that

SOME PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

the words have similar development subsequently in that *kratu* comes to mean 'ritual action' (Gīta IX, 16) and *samskārah* 'sacraments'. The similarity in the use of the two words seems in fact to be so close that Pali *saṅkhāra* may be deemed to be the historical successor of Upaniṣadic *kratu* and if the concept of *kratu* is very much alive in the Pali term which in any case has a more precise connotation there is little cause for Mrs. Rhys Davids complaint¹³ that "the dying out of *kratu* after the day of the greater Upaniṣads was a serious loss to the vehicle in which the early Buddhists had to give their message".

We have now studied the various types of contexts in which the word *saṅkhāra* was used and learnt the more important aspects of the history of the concept. It is now left for us to probe the other mode of inquiring into the meaning especially of a Pali or Sanskrit term, namely, an analysis of the term itself. That this is sometimes a most fruitful source of the knowledge of meaning cannot be denied. For instance if in Sanskrit a word is formed by adding the suffixes *-tr* or *-tra* to a root then it denotes the agent or the instrument respectively of the action of the verb. But the term *saṅkhāra* is in this respect disappointing for though we know that it is built up of prefix *saṃ* meaning 'together with', root *kr* meaning 'to do' and a suffix *-a* which may be used to denote an agent or action noun, this knowledge gives no clue as to its meaning.

Our next task is to translate the term and to analyse some of the difficulties involved. In the course of our study of the contexts in which the word was used we had recourse to numerous make shift translations such as volitional acts, acts of will, willed actions, purposive actions, acts of deliberation, disposition, bodily reflexes etc. though we often left the word untranslated. In the majority of its uses it had a psychological application while in its non-psychological applications (e.g. *āyusaṅkhāra*) it conveyed the idea of motive force bringing out the dynamic quality of the *saṅkhāra*—in which it resembled its psychological uses. In its psychological uses it denoted primarily a deliberate act of will, consciously carried out in which there was an aspiration after ends, a decision to pursue a certain line of action culminating in the completion of the consequent activity and the whole of which had a dynamic influence on the future life and behaviour of the individual. From this it developed the secondary sense of subconscious impressions which had a determinative influence on one's future life. It included activities below the level of the conscious will—i.e. reflex actions such as breathing—but which were ostensibly purposive in character although all these activities were ultimately controllable including the motive force of life, though their operations could be present even if the agent was unaware (*asampajāna*) of them. All these activities could likewise be performed on the initiative of the individual or at

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 112.

the instigation of others. Our study of the concept was confined to the stratum or strata represented by Pali Nikāyas and it essentially denoted conscious and unconscious aspects of the will, a sense which is confirmed by the previous and subsequent history of the concept and although one or two contexts were discovered in which this sense is not very evident, a closer analysis revealed that it was not unlikely as well—and in any case we could make allowance for the possibility that the word was not understood in a certain community of monks whose doctrines were incorporated into the Canon. In this respect it is of great significance that apart from the traditional exegesis on *saṅkhāra* in “*aniccā vata saṅkhārā*” as all ‘compounded constituents’ there isn’t a single instance in the Canon of the word being used of a material object or objects compounded of elements. The relation of its etymology to its meaning is also not clear. Keith¹⁴ plausibly suggests “making ready or making something for an end”. The idea suggested may be that of putting together into an orderly system a set of disconnected elements and producing a coordinated activity.

Yet it is evident that some translators seemed to have been guided largely by the etymology of the term than by the meanings elicited in its several contexts and this explains the choice of such terms as ‘component things, confections, combinations, conformations, compositions, aggregates, compounds syntheses etc.’ This translation is not very illuminating for all that it suggests to the reader is that *saṅkhārā* means ‘things that are put together’ for we do not know the empirical objects for which the terms ‘conformation’ etc. apply and do not apply. ‘Activities’ brings out its dynamic import but can hardly be deemed a translation. ‘Coordinated activity’ conveys the idea of the ‘compound’ as well as the dynamism of the term. ‘Complexes’ brings out its psychological aspect but if it is meant to include physical complexes, the translation is questionable for there is no instance in which *saṅkhārā* is used in this sense; on the other hand it unfortunately has a restricted psychoanalytic application in referring to the Oedipus, Electra or Jehovah complexes (not to speak of the ‘inferiority’ complex). ‘Constructive activity’ has the added advantage of emphasising the volitional side.

One of the senses that seem to have strongly suggested itself to scholars as the meaning of *saṅkhārā* is that of ‘antecedent conditions’ for the production of a given result. There seems to be little basis for this meaning apart from the explanation given of *vacīsaṅkhārā* in one passage which we have mentioned above where ‘reflection and investigation’ (*vitakkavicārā*) are said to be the *vacīsaṅkhārā* because one utters words after (*pacchā*) such reflection and investigation. The idea may also have been suggested by the fact that the *saṅkhārā* form the necessary preconditions for the development of a new individuality. The suggested translations “coefficients of conscious-

14. A. B. Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 50.

SOME PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

ness and physical life, constituent, cause-combination, aggregate of conditions or essential properties for a given result, essential conditions, antecedents, mental coefficients, mental concomitants" (P.T.S. Dictionary, s.v. *saṅkhāra*) "predispositions, preceding conjunctures"—all reflect this idea but in doing so seems to stray unnecessarily from the central notion of the concept as denoting 'will'.

Perhaps the nearest approach to the term lies in 'synergies' and 'dispositions'. In 'synergies' we have a word which reflects the etymological form of *saṅkhāra* has a psychological application, a dynamic import and denotes a coordinated activity, though this too has a tendency to develop technical senses as for instance in the notion of the synergy theory. The same objection may be raised to 'reflex' in addition to the fact that not all *saṅkhāras* are reflexes as also the fact that according to Indian paranormal psychology the rigidity of the reflex action is only apparent for all reflexes are said to come under the control of the will in certain states of trance. 'Dispositions', partly owing to the looseness of the term could be utilised with much greater success to render *saṅkhārā* for it denotes pattern reactions, has the necessary dynamic quality of *saṅkhārā* in influencing the present and comes to mean an organised mental tendency produced from past experiences but for this same reason it is perhaps not strong enough to imply present acts of will as well, unlike *saṅkhāra*.

The nearest concept to *saṅkhāra* in any single system of Western Philosophy is probably that of Spinoza's theory of the 'conatus' (as interpreted by Professor C. D. Broad.)¹⁵ The conatus which Broad translates as the Vital Impulse (parallel to *bhavaśaṅkhāra*) has a dual aspect, the bodily aspect or "the tendency of the human organism to maintain its characteristic form and balance in spite of and by means of its interaction with its surroundings (parallel to *jīvitasaṅkhāra*) and the mental aspect or "the tendency of the human mind to maintain its characteristic unity and purposes in spite of and by means of the influences that are constantly affecting it" (parallel to *manośaṅkhārā*). "A man's Vital Impulse then is the fundamental thing in him; and all his particular behaviour, bodily and mental is just an expression of the reaction of this Vital Impulse to particular situations" (cp. *suddhasaṅkhārapuñjo'yaṃ*) (SN. I, 135). "I need not be conscious of my own Vital Impulse although my Vital Impulse is in one aspect a state of my consciousness" (cp. *asampajāno cittasaṅkhāram abhisāṅkharoti*) (AN. II, 158). The main difference in addition to the fundamental differences in the metaphysical background of the two theories is that Spinoza is a rigid determinist and although one can be aware or unaware of the mental impulses one cannot alter them, whereas it is possible in Buddhism to develop new *saṅkhāras*

15. C. D. Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, p. 22 ff.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

just as much as we are influenced by them. The parallelism between the two theories is however not precise even in other respects.

The main difficulty in translation therefore springs from the fact that the classification of empirical facts differs however slightly from language to language and this difference is reflected in the concepts denoted by the words of each language. This means that it is not always possible to find a single word of one language which may be used in all the contexts of a parallel word of another language. To translate a single word of one language some words of the other language will have to be used in some contexts and others in others. It is possible that a few words or one word could be used in more contexts than others but this does not mean that even in these contexts the two words mean exactly the same.

In the next article we shall raise certain specific problems that we referred to in an earlier paragraph. The first deals with the difficulties in translation due to a different classification of concepts in Pali where we get a Fourfold Schema in place of the Aristotelian Schema familiar to the West and the English reader. The second deals with the translation of the concepts of paranormal and mystical psychology and the third the problems of interpretation arising out of the use of Western metaphysical terms like Theism, Atheism, Idealism, Realism etc. to describe Eastern Philosophical Systems as found in the contents of the Pali Canon and the Upaniṣads.

K. N. JAYATILLEKE