

Richard Gombrich *Buddhism and Pali*

Bryan De Notariis
Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

Review of Gombrich, Richard (2018). *Buddhism and Pali*. Oxford: Mud Pie, 118 pp.

This book is a very good introduction written in a didactic way to the history of Pāli language, its grammatical features, and its style. But this book is not just that, since a new theory concerning the origin of the Pāli language is introduced. The book in its first three chapters is a very good primer for a student who is approaching the study of the Pāli language without previous knowledge of Sanskrit, but also linguistics in general.

Chapter 1, “Pali in History”, deals with the origin and developments of Pāli. Richard Gombrich has based this chapter mainly on his own studies and the works of scholars such as Kenneth R. Norman and Oskar von Hinüber. In this chapter, Gombrich has argued that the word ‘Pāli’ “is connected with a Sanskrit verbal root ‘paṭh’, meaning ‘recite’, and originally meant ‘text for recitation’” (11). Concerning this etymology, Gombrich circulated a more detailed explanation that includes his justification for such kind of derivation via email. I hope that this document will be published in the future.

Chapter 2, “The Linguistic Character of Pali”, takes advantage of Gombrich’s experience in teaching Pāli. As Gombrich himself wrote: “[f]or many years I have been teaching courses in Pali, under the auspices of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies [...], [t]he main course is introductory, and I have written a primer of the language to serve as its backbone. Much of the information in this chapter can also be found in that course book” (25). The result is a chapter able



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Submitted
Published

2019-05-13
2019-06-27

Open access

© 2019 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



Citation De Notariis, Bryan (2019). Review of *Buddhism and Pali*, by Gombrich, Richard. *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie orientale*, 55, 657-660.

DOI 10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2019/01/024

657

to lead by hand even the most inexperienced reader into the maze of the Pāli linguistics. Gombrich is able to present to the reader some technical arguments – such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon – through an appealing language, making use of practical examples which are sometimes even fun, just as when he explains the compound called in Pāli *bahubbīhi* (Sanskrit: *bahuvrīhi*): “[a] common kind of compound which is not very common in English is called ‘exocentric’ because it refers to something outside itself. A ‘redcoat’ is not a type of coat but a man with a red coat (in olden days, a soldier) [...], an ‘egghead’ is a person with an egglike head, not just the head of such a person” (39). Concerning this chapter, the only specification that I can offer regards the following statement: “[t]he verses of the *Dhammapada* are ascribed *en masse* to the Buddha. The commentary on the text always describes on what occasion the Buddha uttered the verse(s), but it is a very late composition, maybe a thousand years after the time of the Buddha, so this information may not be reliable” (45). Although the actual Pāli commentaries are works composed since the fifth century AD onward, the material on which they are based could be considerably older. However, Gombrich is certainly aware of this fact (as it is demonstrated by Gombrich 2009, 106), and I should specify that my specification does not affect his argument because a huge gap between the supposed period of the Buddha’s life and the material used to compose the actual Pāli commentaries could (and probably should) be assumed. Old commentaries – such as the *padabhājanīya* of the *Pātimokkha*, and the *Niddesa* – were, indeed, embedded within the Pāli canon (cf. Norman 1997, 149-50) and this could allow one to assume that the other commentarial material was most likely composed in later times, or at least remained open to changes for longer, since it had never achieved the canonical status. As far as we know, the Sri Lankan commentarial tradition was an open corpus of texts until the third century AD (cf. Mori [1988] 1989).

Chapter 3, “Pali Prose Style”, deals mainly with the orality as one of the main factors in determining the style of the Pāli Buddhist texts. In this regard, Gombrich quotes a very recent report from the *Scientific American*¹ in order to “dispel the scepticism likely to be found in the modern reader” (49) concerning the possibility to transmit orally a huge amount of texts (scholars may be interested in knowing that there is also a paper about it, see Hartzell et al. 2016).

Chapter 4, “Pali in Buddhist Ideology”, explains the most innovative theory within the book. Gombrich introduced his theory as follows: “[i]n my view – perhaps shared by no other modern scholar – it

¹ See <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/a-neuroscientist-explores-the-sanskrit-effect/> (2019-02-07).

[i.e. Pāli language] may also have been the language that the Buddha spoke, at least when preaching” (69). At first, Gombrich considers the Buddha’s approach against Sanskrit and the fact that he recommended the use of the local idioms, acknowledging a conventional character for all the languages. He argued against the widespread opinion that considers Pāli an artificial language: “[b]ecause of various inconsistencies, such as the use of some Sanskritisms and borrowings from other dialects, it is often said (I have said so myself) that Pali is an artificial language. But what does this mean? Modern English evolved from a large admixture of Norman French into Anglo-Saxon, and we still frequently add gallicisms and other borrowings from foreign languages” (75-6). Therefore, Gombrich suggests that Pāli was a kind of lingua franca, more specifically an argot, used by the Buddha and his followers to communicate with each other and with the population during their wondering in northeast India (84). This theory is certainly fascinating for any scholar involved in the study of Buddhism and especially for those who are interested in the study of the Pāli texts. I think that the theorisation of a kind of ‘ascetic argot’ could be an interesting solution for an intrinsic problem of the Pāli language structure. On the one hand, the Pāli language is full of the so-called *Magadhisim*, namely some inflexions or anomalous features which are ascribable to the eastern language of the Magadha. In this regard, Gombrich argued that some words such as the vocative plural *bhikkhave* “O monks!” (the expected form in Pāli should be *bhikkhavo*) and the odd term *sukhallika* ‘pleasure’ (with the superfluous suffix *-allika*) could be ‘frozen’ forms, a reminiscence of how the Buddha spoke (79). On the other, comparing Pāli with the Aśoka’s inscriptions “we can confidently say that Pali has a preponderance of what, two centuries (or a bit less) after the Buddha, were western rather than eastern features” (81-2). Assuming that Pāli was a language really spoken in India, a couple of questions would arise: Where it was spoken? By whom it was spoken? The theory suggested by Richard Gombrich, that I would call the ‘ascetic argot theory’, tries to answer to both questions. It goes without saying that the early Buddhists and the founder of Buddhism itself, namely the Buddha, not only had to speak one or more Indian languages, but had to communicate with a multilinguistic audience widespread in north India. A way of communication was needed and a proper way to communicate had to be developed if it had not already been in existence. Certainly, early Buddhists spoke in some manners. So, in this regard, Gombrich addressed the elephant into the room that, however, seems to be mostly ignored by scholars. If the early Buddhist had spoken a north India lingua franca that was not Sanskrit but a kind of Prakrit and we have the Pāli language, which is a Prakrit language that has features typical of the north India area in which the Buddha lived and preached according to the traditional sources, why could not it

be the language spoken by the Buddha? With ‘the language spoken by the Buddha’ Gombrich does not mean exactly the same language, but a language that although underwent a process of standardisation, could preserve memory of how the Buddha spoke: “[w]hen after some years his [i.e. Buddha’s] followers wrote down what he said and made some attempt to standardise it by giving it a set grammar and an orthography, they were to some extent guided by the only grammar and orthography which existed in their culture, those of Sanskrit, but they were also concerned to retain as best they could the precise characteristics of their teacher’s language as preserved by their oral tradition” (84-5).

In Conclusion, I strongly recommend reading this book since it does not only introduce the Pāli language in a didactic and appealing way, but it also provides scholars with something to think about. This is certainly a “bold hypothesis” as sometimes Gombrich himself admits (e.g. 46), however I think we still need brave scholars able to produce bold hypotheses in order to allow the Popperian epistemology based on conjecture and refutation, so dear to Gombrich, to work at its best. Without hypotheses there would not be refutation or corroboration, but without bold hypothesis there would not be intriguing challenges which are the propelling force that drives many individuals to continue doing research.

Bibliography

- Gombrich, Richard F. (2009). *What the Buddha Thought*. London: Oakville, Equinox.
- Hartzell, James F. et al. (2016). “Brains of Verbal Memory Specialists Show Anatomical Differences in Language, Memory and Visual Systems”. *NeuroImage*, 131, 181-92. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2015.07.027>.
- Mori, Sodo [1988] (1989). “Chronology of the ‘Sīhaḷa Sources’ for the Pāli Commentaries (II)”. Mori, Sodo (ed.), *Studies of the Pāli Commentaries. A Provisional Collection of Articles*. Saitama: Sodō Mori, 57-105.
- Norman, Kenneth R. (1997). *A Philological Approach to Buddhism. The Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai Lectures 1994*. London: SOAS.