Metadata & Discovery Group

Cataloguing Buddhist literature in English

ethical issues in an assay

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ABSTRACT

Having been ordained for twenty-five years as a Buddhist monk, I have a vested interest in being able to present to Westerners a knowledge and understanding of the full extent of the 'Three Baskets' of the Buddha's teaching, which is to say; the Tripitaka. For Western Buddhist monastics, or serious lay people generally, such an understanding used to require extensive study in foreign languages, such as Pali, Chinese, Japanese, or Tibetan. I believe it no longer does due to the volume of traditional Buddhist texts that have been translated into English over the course of the last two hundred years.

This belief however, presupposes a comprehensive inventory in which the individual works, in their English language versions can be presented in relation to each other, a resource which hasn't previously existed.

This article describes the creation of a new catalogue to hopefully meet that need, illustrating a particular ethical issue that was encountered.

KEYWORDS Tripitaka; Buddhist literature; cataloguing ethics

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Over the course of the last couple of years I have managed to compile a catalogue of bibliographic material that has not previously been recorded in one location. I am calling it 'The Democratic English Tripitaka' as it lists every Buddhist literary text, written before the year 1900 that has been translated into the English language.

Since my catalogue is as yet unpublished I remain very much an amateur cataloguer, and therefore I hope this article will read like a series of questions, rather than a series of assertions. I am very open to advice.

I should explain that since 1998 I have lived and worked full time as an ordained monk at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, a monastery and retreat centre in the North of England. Although the project I have taken on relates to my vocation, it is not actually central to it, as my vocation is the practice and teaching of meditation and the ethical Precepts of Soto Zen.

Since my ordination I have kept notes of my spiritual reading for my own benefit, and as the years have passed the notes have added up to the point where I realised that there was in fact no central resource I could refer to which would relate the various translated texts I have encountered to each other in a semantically meaningful way. Also, it so happens that in many cases there are several translations of the same text which, because they have different English titles, are very hard to recognise as versions of the same basic work. Not only that, but the texts I am interested in are sometimes half-hidden in books, articles or dissertations in which the presentation of the translation is only incidental to the authors main subject, and the name of the text is given in non-Latin script. In other words, *discovery* has been very much an issue.

In a recent edition of this journal, Veronica Ranieri, a Cataloguing Policy Specialist at the Library of Congress wrote: 'When learning about a discipline and mapping it out in a controlled vocabulary... the amateur proceeds with enthusiasm and wonder. The delight a person experiences when reaching an understanding of a topic is not something that can be conveyed through professional training. Instead it is a result of approaching the topic with a receptive, even reverent disposition.' (Ranieri, 2022). I was pleased to read this because it accurately describes my own experience. For some reason, the process of compiling a catalogue, where one has not previously existed has been, and is, for me an ongoing source of joy!

There are of course a number of thorny issues that I have encountered in the course of my cataloguing journey, some of which are ontological, and some very much ethical. In order to explore these I will need to explain the content of my catalogue in a little more detail.

To begin with, the field of Buddhist literature exists to pass on the teachings of the Buddha. It is soteriological in outlook, in that it seeks to assist the reader in their journey to salvation (from suffering), yet the Buddha himself didn't write anything down, nor did any of his immediate disciples. In fact nothing was written down until several hundred years after the Buddha's *parinirvana* (death). It was only when a council was eventually convened to compare the disparate oral versions of the Buddha's teaching that were in circulation, that the remembered teachings were made tangible.

Later on, among the geographically distant monastic *Sanghas* (followers of the Buddha), there eventually arose different versions of these written teachings, some in the Sanskrit language, and some in Pali. The first texts that were written down were the *Sutras* (the scriptural texts), but then two other bodies of literature also came into existence: the *Vinaya*, (the rules for the *Sangha*), and the *Abhidhamma*, (exegetical texts, written in order to draw out the implications of the Sutras).

Here lies the first ontological problem, for while the Abhidhamma texts are traditionally described, alongside the Sutras and Vinaya texts as, 'Words of the Buddha', they must, realistically be attributed to later hands since they record material

obviously created after his death. Yet it was only when the first Tibetan catalogue of Buddhist literature was created, the *Denkarma*, which was published in the year 812, (Halkias, 2024), that the firm ontological distinction between 'Words of the Buddha' and 'words of Buddhist teachers' was formulated.

In Tibetan Buddhism, to this day there are two catalogues of texts (translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan): the *Kanjur* for the Words of the Buddha, and the *Tanjur*, for the words of Indian Buddhist teachers. This was the Tibetan solution to the problem of classification.

The Denkarma was by no means the first catalogue of its kind however. China had embraced Buddhism many centuries before Tibet, and had an even longer history of cataloguing. A notable catalogue called *Kaiyuan* was printed, in the year 730, (Wu, 2020). Like the Denkarma catalogue, it also listed translations of, a very similar, though not identical corpus of Indian Sanskrit texts — but naturally enough these were translations into Chinese, rather than Tibetan.

Hopefully it is clear then, that when Western scholars first encountered this literature they were faced with multiple versions of what were essentially similar works, but created over the course of many hundreds of years, created in disparate geographical locations, consisting of translations of numerous alternative editions, and with each edition itself based on considerable numbers of, often no longer extant manuscript witnesses, in a variety of difficult scripts. In many cases there is no actual *work* remaining from which the *versions* can be shown to derive. Indeed, there may never have been an original work in some cases at all, hence there are issues of authenticity too!

Over the course of what is, by now nearly two hundred years, Western scholars have rendered, in total (according to my research), 800 of those Chinese and Tibetan translations into English. It would be easy to lump all these English translations together in a catalogue, *but are translations into English of a Chinese version of a Sanskrit text, the same as English translations of Tibetan translations of a Sanskrit text?* What about translations into English directly from the Sanskrit, when the Sanskrit manuscript still exists? Arguably, for current cataloguers the Bibframe 2.0 vocabulary of Works and Versions is inadequate to encapsulate the complexity when English versions are versions of Tibetan versions, which are versions of Sanskrit versions, which are versions of works in yet earlier languages that weren't written down because they were preserved orally. But perhaps I am not understanding something here?

There are concordances between *versions*, certainly, and where these exist I have indicated them in my catalogue, but finding a taxonomy that would permit different *versions* of similar *works* to be held together in semantically meaningful relationships was a challenge that required an innovative approach, *as no unified catalogue of all this material has ever been created before*.

My solution has been to create separate bibliographical listings in the following chapters:

- Indian records of the Words of the Buddha translated into English.
- Indian records of the words of Buddhist Teachers translated into English.
- Chinese records of the Words of the Buddha translated into English.
- Chinese records of the words of Indian Buddhist teachers translated into English.
- Records of the words of Chinese, Korean & Japanese Buddhist teachers translated into English.
- Tibetan records of the Words of the Buddha translated into English.
- Tibetan records of the words of Indian Buddhist teachers translated into English.
- Records of the words of Tibetan Buddhist teachers translated into English.
- Records of the words of Buddhist Teachers in English.

This categorisation is sufficient to allow all Buddhist texts (written before the year 1900), with translations into English to be ordered, and also allows a final chapter to include bibliographical listings of Buddhist texts originally written in, or first published in English. This innovation places them alongside those texts written in the traditional languages of Buddhism. Such is the potential power of the cataloguer!

Ordering the listings within each of the chapters above was most simply achieved by using pre-existing taxonomies, since that allowed the use of existing catalogue numbers. Overturning the work of generations of previous scholars of the Tripitaka was never my intention.

To begin with, Indian records of Buddhist texts translated into English consist of translations from two distinct languages: Pali and Sanskrit. Whereas Pali texts have been organised into a taxonomic list since the early twentieth century — they were outlined and numbered in the bibliography of the Prolegomena to Volume One of *A Critical Pali Dictionary*, (Trenckner, 1924) — Sanskrit texts were never part of an organised ‘canon’, and as such were never given catalogue numbers. This meant that the only current authority, is a database of digital texts created and maintained by the University of the West (UWest) in Rosemead, California, called the *Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon* (DSBC). An expert in the field, Dr. Alexander J. O’Neill was able to assure me independently that the taxonomy UWest has adopted is not only reliable, but ethically appropriate, since the scholars directing DSBC hail from Nepal, where many of their existing Sanskrit manuscripts are preserved.

The situation with regards to the pre-existing taxonomies for Chinese, and particularly Tibetan texts is less ethically straightforward, however, which leads on to some ethical questions that relate to the *Cataloguing Code of Ethics*, prepared by

members from cataloguing communities in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and other countries, and endorsed by CILIP in spring of 2022.

The supporting material for the Code contains the following; 'Cataloguing standards and practices are currently and historically characterised by racism, white supremacy, colonialism, othering, and oppression.' (Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee, 2021). This is arguably true when the material being catalogued originates from Western environments, however the catalogues of Buddhist material most commonly used in modern Buddhist Studies are primarily of Japanese origin.

In the 1930s Japanese scholars created a catalogue called the *Taisho Tripitaka*, (Takakusu, 1924). This updated all the earlier Chinese catalogues according to Western scientific knowledge organisation principles. It is still the leading reference for East Asian Buddhist works. However, while it adds autochthonous Japanese Buddhist texts alongside Chinese works, it chooses not to add the very many Korean works that could have been added (another instance of the power of the cataloguer). It is worth bearing in mind that Japan had annexed Formosa (Taiwan), in 1895, conquered the Korean empire in 1910, and was in the process of violently occupying Manchuria in the 1930s as well.

With regards to Tibet, the Tibetan people escaped military predation from Japan, but its monastic institutions, in an academic sense did not. In 1934, *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons*, was published by 'Tohoku Imperial University', in Japan, (Ui, 1934). This catalogue presented the Tibetan Kanjur and Tanjur according to Western scientific principles.

Though again, this catalogue is still in use, arguably aspects of its creation were a case of cultural appropriation by Japanese scholars, caught up in the rise of Japanese nationalism. In particular, the siglum used to number texts in the Tohoku University catalogue did not reflect the Tibetan origin of the texts, but imposed upon them a reference to the university itself, in Japan. That is to say, the original edition of the Kanjur and Tanjur had been prepared in the Derge monastic complex in Tibet in the 1770s, yet the Tohoku catalogue labelled each text with a Toh. number.

Although there are, generally speaking questions about the ethical behaviour of Japanese scholars in Japan in the 1930s, to the extent that we fail to recognise this, there are also questions for us in the West. While we now firmly understand the potential for knowledge organisations (as it says in the Cataloguing Code of Ethics), to 'codify systems of oppression', it is easy to assume that the origin of those systems of oppression are necessarily 'white supremacy'. In fact, the words I quoted above, used to describe the scope of the code, that go on to say; 'Cataloguing standards and practices are currently and historically characterised by racism, white supremacy, colonialism, othering and oppression', could arguably be said to just as accurately describe the practices deliberately or inadvertently instituted by those Japanese scholars in the 1930s. Of course, we would hardly describe them as supporting 'yellow

supremacy'! Especially not since the Library of Congress Subject Heading 'Yellow Peril' was flagged as racist by Sandy Berman, in *Prejudices and Antipathies*, (Berman, 1971).

The point ultimately is that the effect on societies of racism is deleterious, from whatever source it comes, and it would be ironic if a Western-centric bias inadvertently coloured attempts to diminish it.

To this end, I was pleased to discover that the *Cataloguing Code of Ethics* clearly understands this. I hope that by involving greater input from non-Western cataloguing communities in the future, any lingering Western-centric bias in its wording may be overcome. I imagine that Chinese cataloguers, and metadata managers for instance might be interested in countering the long term effects of the bias(es) of Japanese scholars during the early twentieth century? This would be to everyone's benefit.

As for my own catalogue, the total number of works with translations into English (as of May 1st 2024), stands at 1860. The number of new texts receiving their first translation year on year however, is increasing *exponentially*. My hope is that with the dataset now accessible online via my Orchid ID, it will be possible for interested parties to adopt the classificatory system I have created and suggest additions or changes to it as new texts are translated. This crowd-sourcing of bibliographic references may be the only way one person can maintain a catalogue such as this into the future, especially as AI makes the task of translating texts more and more straightforward. It would also be the justification for my description of the English Tripitaka catalogue as 'democratic'.

As for providing interoperability in order that other databases (such as the *Buddhist Digital Archives*) should be able to draw upon my dataset as it develops, the coding necessary to build the interface is beyond my skill set currently, but, as I mentioned at the beginning, the cataloguing journey remains a source of Joy!

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