# On Translation

## Translator: Glenn Wallis

**Glenn Wallis** is the chair of the Applied Meditation Studies program at the Won Institute of Graduate Studies, near Philadelphia. He specializes in Indian Buddhism and is the author of, most recently, *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*. He has a Ph.D. in Sanskrit and Indian Studies from Harvard.

## Current Translation Project

*The Path to Discrimination;* (Chapter 3) *Exposition on present-moment awareness using the breath* (Pali: *Paṭisambhidāmagga; Ānāpānasatikathā*). The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is the twelfth book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the Pali Canon.

## Q & A

*What drew you to this project?* Q

The classical discourses, or *Suttas*, have the Buddha speaking of *ānāpānasati* meditation as his very own practice. As both a student of Buddhism and a meditation practitioner, I have always found it difficult to understand why this practice is not held in higher regard by all Buddhists, regardless of school affiliation, given that it's what the Buddha taught and practiced. So, what initially attracted me to this text was the hope that it would provide a fuller account of the rather barebones description that the practice receives in the *Sutta* and *Saṃyutta* material.

*Have there been previous English translations of this text?*

Yes. However, the original translator rendered the entire *Paṭisambhidāmagga*—more than four hundred printed pages—over a four-month period! So, as admirable as it is, the translation could not be expected to be anything other than a rough and ready pioneering effort. One of the problems is that it lacks a nuanced consideration of the terminology. The original translator held fast to a consistent translation of a term throughout the text, regardless of shifting shades of meaning. It also lacks commentary, in the form of introductory material, synopsis, and annotation, which is crucial to producing a coherent translation.

*What is your approach to translating the dharma?*

I initially approach translation of the dharma as a grateful, somewhat shy, conversation partner. Once I gain confidence that I can converse with the text, I try to guide the conversation/translation toward a particular place. This place occupies a middle ground between a tight philological rendering and a loose interpretive one. The former ensures a measure of historical and doctrinal accuracy; the latter, that the text speak to the present-day reader.

*What are some of the biggest challenges you've encountered in your translation work?*

In the case of Pali canonical literature, one of the main challenges is to bring the dynamism of spoken discourse (which ostensibly underlies the material) to a scripted, formulaic oral transmission. In addition, my most vexing personal challenge is how to deal with what have become expected English renderings of dharma terms. In too many cases, Buddhist-English terminology is unclear and inconsistent, or, worse, absurd and erroneous. It is particularly difficult to challenge familiar vocabulary without putting off the reader. Translating *cattāri ariyasaccāni*, for instance, as "four preeminent realities," rather than the anticipated (but nonsensical) "four noble truths," or *sati* as "present-moment awareness" rather than the ubiquitous (but misguided) "mindfulness," might come across as eccentric or idiosyncratic, perhaps even fussy. But sometimes a difference makes a difference. My challenge is to introduce what I determine to be necessary terminological changes without jeopardizing the conversation between the text and the reader. ➤

## The Translation

*Note from Glenn Wallis: The words in bold below are ones I feel the reader should be alerted to. They are too important to our understanding of the text to be simply taken for granted (by me) and innocently passed over (by the reader). In the full translation of the text that will be published, I discuss the word choices I've made, along with the underlying Pali, in a glossary, and, in some instances, expand on them in endnotes. It's then up to the reader to dig in further.*

> **Tactile mark**, inhalation, and exhalation
> are not the meditation object for a single instance of **mind**.
> A practitioner who does not know that these are three distinct **phenomena**
> is not able to realize **meditative cultivation**.
>
> Tactile mark, inhalation, and exhalation
> are not the meditation object for a single instance of mind.
> A practitioner who knows that these are three distinct phenomena
> is able to realize meditative cultivation.
>
> It's as if someone were to saw a tree trunk that was lying down on level ground. The person's establishment of **present-moment awareness** is by virtue of the contact between the saw's teeth and the tree trunk. It is not the case that he fixes his **attention** on the back and forth motion of the saw's teeth. But neither is it the case that the back and forth motion of the saw's teeth goes unrecognized by him, for he does **manifest effort** and **accomplish the preliminary practice**. The tree trunk lain on level ground corresponds to the tactile mark as an anchoring. The teeth of the saw correspond to the inhalation and exhalation. The person's establishment of present-moment awareness by virtue of the contact between the saw's teeth and the tree trunk [and so forth, as above, to "preliminary practice"], corresponds to the practitioner's sitting down and establishing present-moment awareness at the tip of his nose or upper lip. He does not fix his attention on the inhalation and exhalation, although these do not go unrecognized by him, for he does manifest effort, **execute the task**, and **achieve the distinctive effect**.

## Translator's Comments

The first thing that struck me about this passage was that it recommends an approach to meditation that differs significantly from the commonplace contemporary direction to "follow the breath." Instead, it recommends fixing your attention on an actual felt sensation: the feeling of the air on the nose. The text's acknowledgement of awareness of peripheral breath is an example of the phenomenological bent of the work, and it will ring true to anyone who has carefully observed the meditative process.

My translation of *nimitta* as "tactile mark" is an example of the challenge that I mentioned. Typically, *nimitta* is rendered as "sign, image, characteristic." In Theravadin exegesis, it even acquires the meaning of "vision," and, from there, wanders off into the mystical, metaphysical, and transcendent. In the text, *nimitta* is symbolized as the precise point where the saw's teeth make contact with the wood. It is at that point that the woodcutter places his attention. Similarly, in meditation practice, the point where the breath makes a palpable impression on the nose/upper lip marks the spot where attention is to placed; hence, "tactile mark." This translation may sound idiosyncratic to experienced readers, but it is a commonsensical choice that, I believe, renders the text's meaning clearer than more familiar translations.

In reading a passage like this, it may help the reader to be aware of the basic historical situation of the work. Otherwise, he or she might lose patience with its dry, almost pedantic nature. Although more research is required, it appears that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* lies on the cusp between the classical *Sutta* material and the emerging *Abhidhamma* literature. As a canonical *Khuddaka Nikāya* work, it is deeply concerned with the issues treated in the former, while searching, like the latter, for a more comprehensive understanding of those issues. Like the later commentarial literature, which it also resembles, the *Ānāpānasatikathā* of the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is an early instance of what Richard Gombrich has characterized as Buddhists thinking along *with* the classical teachings. In that sense, the author of the work is just like the reader—at least, the reader whom I imagine: someone who is conversing with Buddhist teachings in an effort to understand life and thereby realize the pleasure of unbinding.

## Parting Words

A translator is a passionate and obsessive reader. Like a connoisseur, he or she longs to savor each and every word. A text, as Umberto Eco says, is a lazy machine—it requires work from a significant collaborator: a reader. When these three—translator, text, reader—come together, horizons are fused and worlds are born. BD