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Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts: An Elementary Grammatical Guide

Reviewed by Jnan Nanda

Centre of Buddhist Studies, University of Hong Kong

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DHAMMAJOTI, BHIKKHU KL, *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts: An Elementary Grammatical Guide*. Hong Kong: The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2015. 423pp. CAN \$26.00 (pb). ISBN 978-988-16820-1-7.

Numerous Sanskrit grammar books have been written by linguists with different religious and philosophical interests. Their works have one thing in common: these works are heavily based on Brahmanic, and Hindu religious and philosophical texts.¹ Although Sanskrit occupies an important place in Brahmanism, being the language of the elite, contemporary Sanskrit grammarians have often ignored the vast collection of Sanskrit Buddhist texts such as those from the *Sautrantika*, *Sarvastivāda*, *Madhyamika* and *Yogacara* schools. *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts: An Elementary Grammatical Guide* (RBST) intends to fill this gap amongst language primers (viii).

Though this work was intended for graduate students, particularly those in Buddhist studies, it would also be suitable for undergraduate students. Through mastering the basic Buddhist discourses in the guide, graduate students whose research focuses on primary sources will gain a nuanced perspective on the compilation process of Buddhist texts. Ven. Dhammajoti pays careful attention to methodology, bearing in mind that this grammar book is intended for beginners (p. viii). His methodology was the outcome of a long academic career researching Sanskrit and teaching at the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies of the University of Kelaniya in Sri Lanka, later

¹ See Edward Delavan Perry's *A Sanskrit Primer* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1999), and Thomas Egenes' *Introduction to Sanskrit, Two Parts Introduction to Sanskrit, Two Parts*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2011-2012).

at the Centre of Buddhist Studies of the University of Hong Kong, and currently at the Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, where he is a director and professor.

The book consists of thirteen chapters, followed by an English translation of the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* along with its Romanized Sanskrit version, two *sandhi* tables as an appendix, a short list of references, a complete glossary with index, and an additional index of grammatical terms.² The strength of Ven. Dhammajoti's methodology rests on a progressive approach whereby students are not introduced to all of the grammatical rules at the onset, a factor that may impede learning. For instance, they are not acquainted with the grammatical functions of the eight cases of nouns at once. Instead, the rules are gradually introduced throughout the first four lessons. Students will also benefit from the simple expressions used in the work that demonstrate the syntax of each case, the context, and the inclusion of clear examples (see 4-5, 12-15, 29-31, and 50-52 for sample cases). For example, the formation of Sanskrit words and phrases, which includes combinations (*sandhi*-s) and compounds (*samāsa*-s) can often be tricky (see 79, 127). However, Ven. Dhammajoti skillfully guides the learner to understand the morphology of the text. This careful method avoids potential misunderstandings in the translation process.

The clarity of the lessons is an asset to beginners. Throughout the work, Ven. Dhammajoti provides a comprehensive list of base nouns and verbal roots, including the participles, enabling students to understand their origin and formation. Moreover, in the case of word combinations involving the prefixes and suffixes (for instance, *abhi-saṃ-bhotsye*, 137),

² Brett Shult's "Review of *Reading Buddhist Sanskrit Texts: An Elementary Grammatical Guide*," 1st ed, by KL Dhammajoti in *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 4 (2013): 148-149.

Ven. Dhammajoti has separated the combinations with hyphens, for convenience.

RBST is also set apart from other Sanskrit primers through Ven. Dhammajoti's word selections. Each exercise features terminology that highlights a special message or philosophical aspect that the original Sanskrit compiler intended his audience to know; for example, the phrase “*yad anityam tad duḥkham*” (“that which is impermanent is suffering”) is used to demonstrate the usage of relative pronouns, while also offering a relevant lesson on *duḥkha* (115). Subsequently, students not only learn Sanskrit grammar, but also establish a foundation in the basic teachings and the role of semantics in Buddhist Studies (vi). Through this method, *RBST* maintains the interest of beginners, who may otherwise find the process of acquiring Sanskrit daunting.

RBST also benefits potential graduate students interested in discourse analyses or historical linguistic studies of Buddhist primary sources. Ven. Dhammajoti conveniently provides the Chinese rendering for most of the selected words and phrases in the vocabulary list and at the end of every lesson.³ Users will also find the inclusion of Chinese in the glossary to be handy.⁴ Additionally, Ven. Dhammajoti includes pertinent information about the earliest and later sutras in which the words and phrases appear, providing a helpful resource for etymological understandings.

³ As is the case in his other works where Ven. Dhammajoti provides the corresponding Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, for instance. See for example, note 30 on page 14 of *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* (Hong Kong: The Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2015); See also note 18 on page 49, notes 30 and 43 on page 139 of Dhammajoti's *Abhidharma Doctrines and Controversies on Perception* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2007).

⁴ Schults, “*Sanskrit Texts*,” 148-149.

The first edition of *RBST* had minor drawbacks. Schults's review pointed out weaknesses that the "artificial division" of the master vocabulary list "impedes, rather than encourages, the efforts to first see and then understand words which are related to one another."⁵ To facilitate the understanding of morphology, Ven. Dhammajoti removed the divisions, providing a comprehensive vocabulary list in the third edition (see 369-422).

In the second and third editions, several new exercises have been added to the lessons⁶ while some that appeared in the first edition have been removed.⁷ Ven. Dhammajoti claims that the changes served to "ensure a relative homogeneity and consistency in terms of terminology and idiomatic usage, etc. in the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures" (vi). The simplifications, involving fewer themes and focused on fewer texts, is a welcome addition to user friendliness. Minor revisions involve the inclusion of new terminology to the vocabulary list (see 108-114) and additional references to Chinese texts (see vii, 186-190).

Among the few things that have remained unchanged in the third edition is *RBST*'s exclusive reliance on simplified *sandhi* tables.⁸ While Ven. Dhammajoti's exclusion of advanced *sandhi* tables is deliberate, to avoid complication for beginners, it is recommended that instructors

⁵ Schults, "Sanskrit Texts," 149.

⁶ For example, lesson two has significant revisions between the 1st and third edition.

⁷ See 40-42 and 38-39 in the third and first editions of *RBST* respectively. In the first edition, each lesson draws mainly from the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, the larger *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* and the *Sphuṭarthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*. The second edition includes additions from the *Aṣṭa-sāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (see vii). The second edition of *RBST* also includes minor revisions to amend typos, as pointed out by reviewer of the first edition. See Schults, 148-149.

⁸ Schults, "Sanskrit Texts," 152.

and learners adopt Roderick S. Bucknell's *sandhi* tables as an additional resource.⁹

The *RBST* may not be suitable for self-study for all students, as answers to the exercises are not provided. The grammatical analysis provided by Ven. Dhammajoti indicates that he was aware of this, but wanted to guide the students to work on the exercises and to focus on their meaning.

Despite the few minor shortcomings in the *RBST*, the work should be a requisite companion for learners acquiring Sanskrit, especially those in the field of Buddhist Studies. Ven. Dhammajoti's guide is not only complimentary to the study of Buddhism, fulfilling a much-needed niche in the field, but his progressive methodology provides a helpful model for both beginners and advanced learners of Sanskrit.

⁹ Roderick S. Bucknell's *Sanskrit Manual: A Quick-reference Guide to the Phonology and Grammar of Classical Sanskrit* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002), 73-79.