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Pāli and Buddhism: Language and Lineage

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BRYAN G. LEVMAN, *Pāli and Buddhism: Language and Lineage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2021. IX, 452 pp. £67.99 (hb). ISBN 978-1-5275-7555-4.

Today seekers of the historical Buddha knowingly march past the highly Brahmanized world of Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* and the *Lalitavistara Sūtra* into the only moderately Brahmanized world of the Pali Canon. What if that canon's Brahmanism were simply a biased perception conditioned by our own scholarly tradition? What if the Pali Canon world were, in fact, profoundly Indigenous, with only a light Brahmanized veneer? What if the historical Buddha was actually an Indigenous Buddha?

Most of the essays that Bryan G. Levman has collected in *Pāli and Buddhism* investigate this issue. He argues that Pali was profoundly influenced by Indigenous languages, especially Dravidian. Drawing on the work of Johannes Bronkhorst and others,¹ Levman asserts that at the time of the Buddha, Indigenous peoples were a demographic majority in northeast South Asia (vii), and many learned Indo-Aryan to participate with the dominant minority culture. The Buddha's Sakyan clan itself spoke Dravidian (3–4). Although not supporting these specific bold claims, footnotes guide readers to useful background information. This bilingualism effected a “lasting imprint of borrowings from the local culture on the Indo-Aryan languages and Pali in particular” (vii). Indigenous languages gave Pali many hundreds of words, and shaped its syntax and phonology. “Pali” may itself be a Dravidian word. This volume's contribution is to look at this possible historical circumstance's implications for Buddhism.

¹See Johannes Bronkhorst, *Greater Magadha* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

Levman uses the density and prominence of Indigenous-derived names and technical terms in Pali to point to Indigenous cultural survivals in Buddhism. The seer Asita who foretold the Buddha's enlightenment was a matted-hair ascetic *jaṭila*, originally a Dravidian word, which suggests an Indigenous culture of asceticism influencing Buddhism (48–59). That the words for robe (*cīvara*) and for robe-donating ceremony (*kaṭhina*), and related terms, are derived from Dravidian point to a link between Indigenous culture and Buddhist robe technology (64–73). Levman makes a similar argument for funeral rites (113–24). Local *yakkha* deities mostly have Indigenous-derived names (83–88), as do many of the place-names populating the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*'s account of the Buddha's last days (88–112). The *gaṇa-saṅgha* assemblies are Indigenous, in contrast to the Aryan *janapada* kingdoms, and the word *gaṇa*, and possibly *saṅgha*, have Dravidian or Munda origins (80–1, 126–8). The word *muṇḍa* (which may itself be of Indigenous origin) normally means “bald,” perhaps with pejorative force, but may also refer to an Indigenous group, perhaps as a variant name for Mallas, the people among whom the Buddha chose to die (210–34). Turning from etymology to syntax, Chapter 4 complements this argument by illustrating Indigenous linguistic structures' influence on Pali. In addition to morphological features, it looks at shared syntactical patterns, especially the absolutes or participles accomplishing what would otherwise require chains of finite verbs and conjunctions with relative and correlative pronouns. In sum, the “influence of local culture on Buddhism” was “extensive” but “well hidden,” and “only reveals itself in an in-depth analysis of word etymologies” (42).

The fundamental, and likely unanswerable, question is whether that influence was significant then, if it is now only visible buried deep in etymologies. Much depends on the precise stage of linguistic and cultural assimilation at the time of the Buddha. Could it not be the case that the Buddha and Buddhism were drawing from an Aryan culture which

itself was drawing from Indigenous culture—or an Aryan culture which had fully digested and forgotten its roots in Indigenous culture? At what point does the identity shift? One might today sit in a Los Angeles cafe, eating toast smothered with tomato and avocado, drinking hot chocolate, watching a coyote walk past, without realizing that “tomato,” “avocado,” “chocolate,” and “coyote” are all Uto-Aztecan words referring to Indigenous flora and fauna. Reflection on this shows the rich and tasty Indigenous contributions to modern life, but this is not bilingualism or biculturalism in any meaningful way. Words entering a new language can also change register and connotation. The Taíno word “caiman” and the Narragansett “powwow” each lost its spiritual meaning upon entering English, while the Ojibwe “totem” gained one. If no substantial sources survived for, say, nineteenth-century Canada, could we use the evolution of the English language to recreate a history? Of course, where there’s etymological smoke, there may well be a historical fire. That English words from pop culture and technology have found their way into so many other languages does reflect Anglophone strengths in pop culture and in technology.

In a section contrasting “Linguistic vs. Cultural Influence” (132–9), Levman directly addresses these concerns. He admits that toponyms may be purely nominal, but emphasizes that many specifically religious words were adopted. Indeed, this kind of adventurous pioneering scholarship is necessarily speculative, and opens possibilities rather than definitively persuades. Levman’s signals of caution are reassuring. He candidly conveys earlier etymologists’ assessments that a Pali word’s Indigenous origins might be “probable” or “unclear.” Sometimes the discussion is less about proving an Indigenous word origin than about undermining confidence in an Indo-Aryan one. He stipulates that we “have no idea when these words were imported” and “know almost nothing about Indigenous ascetic culture except what is hidden in the words borrowed into... Pali” (60–2).

What are the consequences for scholars or for practitioners? Culture matters. A fundamental debate in North American Buddhism today circles around whether the dhamma is universal or bound to a particular culture.² A new possible understanding of the cultural context may inflect scholars' understandings of the Buddha's soteriological revolution. These issues resonate in Canada today, amidst discussion of relations between "settlers" and "Indigenous," and between "ethnic" and "convert" Buddhists. North Americans who decline to meditate on the grounds of cultural appropriation may be even less inclined to commit the double theft from the Indigenous and from Asia. Could a Buddhism that is Indigenous in its origins be more attractive to Indigenous people in the Americas?

Four chapters in the latter half of the volume turn to other facets of Pali history. "The Language of Early Buddhism" (Chapter 6) considers Pali as a koiné language, in a broad comparative framework alongside the better known inter-language Aramaic and Greek, continuing a debate between Levman and Stefan Karpik.³ The next offers an illuminating overview of the "Evolution of Pali" and its Sanskritization, with examples proposing Old Indic elements that are not survivals but rather later reconstructions. Chapter 8 carefully translates and comments on the *Pāli Myanmā Abhidhān'* dictionary's (ca. 1964–) exhaustive definition of *sati* (usually translated "mindfulness"), which Levman sums up as "control of sense-objects, focus, restraint, effort, stability, equanimity"—an interpretation that might inform modern discussions of mindfulness, includ-

²See Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2019).

³Stefan Karpik, "The Buddha Taught in Pali: A Working Hypothesis," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 16 (2019): 10–86; Bryan Levman, "The Language the Buddha Spoke," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 17 (2019): 63–105; Stefan Karpik, "A Reply to Bryan Levman's *The Language the Buddha Spoke*," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 17 (2019): 106–16.

ing the one Levman himself conducted with Bhikkhu Anālayo.⁴ After considering other possibilities, Chapter 9 looks at the history of nasalization in Middle Indic to conclude that Pali's *-aṃ*, as in the refuge-taking formula *buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, should be pronounced as a nasalized vowel.

Much of this will be too technical for the casual reader, but in some instances the detail illuminates; the careful discussion of the evolution of the word *vedha* (a strap) opened a window for me on how these languages change (280-5). This volume's contents builds on almost two decades' worth of Levman's earlier scholarly-journal articles. Here this scholarship is well integrated as a single book, with a comprehensive index of referenced words (from over seven dozen different languages!), an index of topics, and cross-references binding the chapters together.

Notes on the Contributor

Luke Clossey is an associate professor at Simon Fraser University, where he teaches and researches the global history of ideas. His most recent book is the open-access [*Jesus and the Making of the Modern Mind, 1380-1520*](#) (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2024).

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⁴Bhikkhu Anālayo, "Once Again on Mindfulness and Memory in Early Buddhism," *Mindfulness* 9 (2018): 1–6; Bryan Levman, "Response to Ven. Anālayo's 'Once Again on Mindfulness and Memory in Early Buddhism'," *Mindfulness* 9 (2018): 1041–6; Bhikkhu Anālayo, "Mindfulness Constructs in Early Buddhism and Theravāda: Another Contribution to the Memory Debate," *Mindfulness* 9 (2018): 1047–51; Bryan Levman, "Sati, Memory, and Wisdom: Response to Ven. Anālayo's 'Mindfulness Constructs in early Buddhism and Theravāda: Another Contribution to the Memory Debate,'" *Mindfulness* 9 (2018): 1981–6.