Bu-ston on the Languages Used by Indian Buddhists
at the Schismatic Period

By AKIRA YUYAMA

1.1. In treating an event in the history of Indian Buddhism it is always interesting, and in some cases important, to see if any information in this connection is given by Bu-ston (1290–1364 A.D.) in his work Bde-bar gség-pa'i bstan-pa'i gsal-byed chos-kyi 'byuñ-gnas gsun-rab rin-po-che'i mdzod, or (Bu-ston) Chos-'byuñ in short, which is believed to have been written when he was thirty-three in the year of Chu-phokhyi, “Water-male-dog”, i.e. 1322 A.D.1).

1.2. Among the so-called Chos-'byuñ literature Bu-ston seems to be the only original author who has told us in detail of the languages used by Indian Buddhists at the time of their schism2). The story starts in the section devoted to the controversial Third Council for the first instance. In the sections on the previous councils no mention is made in regard to the languages3).


2) Padma dkar-po (1527–92 A.D.) may well have borrowed Bu-ston’s description in his work Chos-'byuñ bstan-pa'i padma rgyas-pa'i rin-byed, or ‘Brug-pa’i Chos-'byuñ in short (1375 A.D.). Some passages correspond almost verbatim to the Bu-ston Chos-'byuñ, without reference to it or to the works quoted by Bu-ston. This rare book has been published in facsimiles: Tibetan Chronicle of Padma-dkar-po, edited by Lokesh Chandra, with a foreword by E. Gene Smith, New Delhi 1968 (Sūtāpiṭaka Series 75), 8 columns (Smith), 310 folios in facsimile, numbered 1–619.

1.3. The Tibetan original of Bu-ston Chos-'byun has been known to exist for some time, e.g. in the Libraries of Tōhoku University at Sendai, the Seminar of Indian Philosophy and Literature at the University of Tokyo, and the Tōyō Bunko in Tokyo). A facsimile edition of Bu-ston’s collected works has appeared from New Delhi (1965–71), in which is included our text (= Tōhoku 5197).

1.4. It admits of no doubt that Obermiller’s English translation has served as the first aid for those who were unable to consult the original Tibetan text because of its [unreadability, and that it “gives an accurate idea of the original text and is a valuable contribution to the study of Tibetan historiography” (Vostrikov-Gupta p. 142f.). In some cases, however, his translation is rather free and misleading, unless the original is referred to).

1.5. The sections concerning the schisms have been translated into Japanese from the Tibetan by Enga Teramoto and appended to his Japanese translation of Tāranātha’s history of Buddhism. It is to be regretted, however, that the readers have to face some fatal misprints and mistakes in addition to his somewhat free translation.

1.6. Proper attention has been drawn to Bu-ston’s description of the languages at the time of the schisms by L.-K. Lin in his suggestive work. It is a matter for regret, however, that he had to translate it into French from Obermiller’s English version.

1.7. Under these circumstances it will not be superfluous to present the original Tibetan text with regard to the languages used by Indian Buddhists at the period of earlier schisms, though it has not been

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6) Catalogue of the Tōyō Bunko Collection of Tibetan Works on History, edited by Z. Yamaguchi, Tokyo 1970 (Classified Catalogue of the Tōyō Bunko Collection of Tibetan Works 1): No. 345A–2557 (incomplete; written in dū-ḥū-ma: folios 1–335b, missing 2, 3, 101); No. 345B–2558 (= No. 280 of the University of Tokyo); No. 345C–2559 (folios 1–244a); No. 345D–2560 (folios 1–203a).


8) E. Obermiller, History of Buddhism (Chos-hbyung) by Bu-ston, Heidelberg 1981–32 (Materialien zur Kunde des Buddhismus 18–19) [repr. Tokyo 1964 (Suzuki Research Foundation Reprint Series 1)]. This is not a complete translation.


collated with other editions. In this short paper it is intended only to give a straightforward translation with some glossarial notes, and by no means to examine its historical background or linguistic evidence. It is my future task to check the obscure readings with the other editions.

2.1. First of all Bu-ston refers to a theory in regard to the languages used at the time of King Aśoka:


"Some [say]: — 160 years after the Teacher had passed away, in the city called Kusumita (i.e. Pāṭaliputra) at the time of King Aśoka's appearance the Arhats recited the Scripture of the Teacher in Sanskrit (legs-par sbyar-ba, 'well-prepared'), Prakrit (tha-mal-pa, 'vulgar'), Apabhramśa (zur-chag, 'corrupted'), and Paśācī (ša-za'i skad, 'language of the flesh-eaters'). The disciples thus separated. They have thus grown into eighteen schools . . ."

3.1. Bu-ston then quotes Śākyaprabha's Prabhāvatī, composed in the eighth century (ed. Sde-dge 4125 Sū 74a5–162b2; Snar-thaṅ 3618 Hū 83a–184a; Peking 5627 Hū 79b5–184b3), the autocommentary to his Ārya-mūla-sarvāstivāda-srāmanera-kārikā / 'Thags-pa gzi thams-cad yod-par smra-ba'i dge-tshul-gyi tshig-le'u byas-pa (Sde-dge 4124, Snar-thaṅ 3617, Peking 5626)]

11) For other Tibetan editions see e.g. Shūki Yoshimura, Buton no Chibetto Bukkyōshi, Indo Daijō Bukkyō Sōsō Kenkyū (Collected works), Kyoto 1974, p. 548. [This article was originally published in the Bukkyōgaku Kenkyū 6 (1951)].


13) Teramoto's translation of tha-mal-pa with "Hendo-go (a language of borderlands)" is misleading, although it seems to be etymologically connected with tha-ma, "last", tha-ma-la, "in the last place", cf. mtha'-ma, "end", mtha'-mal-pa (= tha-\(^2\)) (cf. Jāschke's Tibetan-English Dictionary, ss.vv.). Cf. also Mahāvyutpatti, ed. R. Sakaki: Nos. 4717–4720.

14) It is to be much regretted that no names of the schools that used these languages are given, and that Bu-ston has not cited the sources of the original materials. As for the language of the Piśācas, it may well reflect a theory that the Sthāviraśādins have used the Paśācī language (cf. otherwise 4.2–4 and 5.1 below). Needless to say, the Sthāviras do not necessarily mean the Pāli Buddhists. One must however bear in mind that the term Pāli did not exist as an appellation of the language before the works quoted by Bu-ston had been composed; cf. R. Pischel, Grammatik der Prākṛita-Sprachen, Straßburg 1900 (Grundriß der indo- aristischen Philologie und Altertumskunde 1.8) [repr. Hildesheim- New York 1973], § 27 end; M. Winternitz, A History of Indian Literature, Vol. II, Calcutta 1933, repr. 1972, p. 226 n. 2; G. K. Nariman, Literary History of Sanskrit Buddhism, Bombay 1920, p. 259; Kögen Mizuno, Pāli-go Bumō, Tokyo 1955, pp. 1, 5 n., 22f., 26.

15) Cf. P. Cordier, Catalogue du fonds tibétain de la Bibliothèque Nationale, IIIe partie, Paris 1915, p. 410 ad Mdo-'grel LXXIX 2–3; also É. Lamotte,

"From the Prabhāvatī ('Od-ladan):—Then King Dharma Aśoka died, and the Arhats, in order to subdue adherence to Prakrit (thā-ma-la), Apabhramṣa (zur-chag-pa) and the language of intermediate speech (bar-mar 'don-pa'i tshig)17), have gradually compiled the Scripture severally, (which have become) the sūtras and the like, composed in the language of great extensiveness (rgya-chan-po'i skad)18). The doctrine has after all grown into eighteen kinds . . ."

3.2. In regard to the schisms Bu-ston then pays attention to the opinion of the Mūla-sarvāstivādins. As a matter of fact, however, it is an extract from the Prabhāvatī (cf. Obermiller II p. 97 n. 636):

gzi-yod-smra-ba na-re bsdu-ba gnis-pa'i bar-du gzi-thams-cad-yod-smra gcig-bu-las med-pa-la de-rjes-nas skad tha-dad-kyis 'don-pas bcu-bdun-te | ... (folio 89a5–6 = ed. Lokesh Chandra 809.5–6)19).

"The Mūla-(Sarva)sāstivādins say:—Until the Second Council there was nothing but only Mūla-Sarvāstivādins. After that (they) recited in different languages, and thus (it has grown) into (another) seventeen (schools) . . ."

4.1. Then Bu-ston refers to the Bhikṣu-varsāgra-prechā / Dge-sloṅ-pi daṅ-po'i lo dri-ba of Padmākaraghoṣa, composed towards the end of


16) Cf. Obermiller II p. 97, Teramoto p. 400. Incidentally, Padma dkar-po' describes in the same wording (folio 24a3–4 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 47.3–4) as Bu-ston (without reference to the source material). Only a few minor variants are a-ṭo-ka (for aśva-ka), 'dul-ba'i (for gdul-pa'i) and dbaṅ-gis (for dbaṅ-gi).

17) It is difficult to know the exact meaning of the Tibetan bar-mar 'don-pa'i tshig. Obermiller translates it by “a dialect of intermediate character” (II p. 97), and Teramoto by “Chūkan-go (an intermediate language)” (p. 400). However, it is certainly used as synonymous to skad 'bruṅ-du 'don-pa or ’-pa'i skad (cf. 4.4, 5.1 below).

18) What is the language of great extensiveness? Tibetan rgya-chan-po'i skad seems to denote not just a single dialect with a small audience. The nucleus of a dialect, absorbing its neighbouring elements as much as possible, would have attracted a more extensive audience. And this appears to have been a specific character of the languages used by Indian Buddhists. It could not be the Sanskrit language (so Obermiller!). Certainly not "Dai Shina-go (the great Chinese language)" (so Teramoto!). It may well be a language or languages used in the so-called Vaipulyasūtras. It is a matter for regret that the original Indic text is lost. Incidentally, rgyal-po'i skad-du (for rgya-chan-po'i . . .) in the original Tanjur (cf. Obermiller II p. 97 n. 630a) seems to be simply a misprint.

the tenth or at the beginning of the eleventh century (ed. Sde-dge 4133 SU 66a 1–70b 3; Peking 5649 U 317a 1–323a 8):20)

lo-dri mkhan-po ltar-na / ... yod-smra-la bzi ... ya-rabs-las 'jig-REN-gyi chos lugs 'byun-ba bzin-du / sam-skR-ta'i skad-kyi brjod-ci'n sde-pa gzan-gyi chos lugs 'byun-ba'i gzi yin-pas gzi-thams-cad-yod-smra'o / mkhan-po rgyal rigs ... sgra-gcan-zin-bzan-po / skad sam-skR-ta'i skad / ... (folios 89b 6–90a 1 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folios 810.6–811.1)21).

"According to the author of the Bhikṣu-varṣāgra-precha, ... (there were) four (schools) among the (Sarva)astivādins ... Just as the mundane laws and customs derive from the upper classes—speaking in the Sanskrit language, (the Sarvāstivādins) were the root (gzi = mūla) of derivation of the laws and customs of the other schools, and thus (they are) the Mūla-Sarvāstivādins. The master was ... Rāhulabhadra, a Kṣatriya. The language was the Sanskrit language ..."

4.2. ... dge-'dun-phal-chang-pa / mkhan-po bram-ze ... 'od-sruṅ-chen-po / skad thā-maI-pa'i skad / ... (folios 90a 2–3 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 811.2–3)23).

"... the Mahāsāṃghikas: The master was Mahākāśyapa, a Brahmin ... The language was the Prakrit language ..."23)

4.3. ... kun-gyis-bkur-ba / mkhan-po dmaI-n sI rigs ... ņe-bar-'khor / skad zur-chag-pa a-bha-bhrām-šī'i skad / ... (folio 90a 3–4 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 811.3–4)24).

"... the Sammitīyas: The master was Upāli, a Śūdra ... The language was the corrupted Abhārāṃśa language ..."25)

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21) Cf. Obermiller II p. 99f., Teramoto p. 402. Incidentally, Bu-ston's description of the language etc. has been ingeniously incorporated (without referring to the source) by Padma dkar-po in his 'Brug-pa'i Chos-'byun (folio 24b 5–6 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 48.5–6): ... thams-cad yod-par smra-ba / sam-skR-ta'i skad-kyi brjod-ci'n sde-pa gzan-gyi chos lugs 'byun-ba'i gzi yin-pas gzi-thams-cad-yod-par-smra-ba'o / mkhan-po rgyal rigs ... sgra-gcan-'dzin-bzan-po ...


23) Teramoto's translation of thā-maI-pa with "Bongo (Sanskrit)" is a fatal mistake. The original must have been thā-maI-pa (neither legs-par sbyar-ba nor sam-skR-ta): cf. 'Brug-pa'i Chos-'byun of Padma dkar-po (folio 25a 1–2 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 49.1–2): ... dge-'dun-phal-chang-pa ... / mkhan-po bram-ze'i rigs ... 'od-sruṅ-chen-po / skad thā-maI-pa / ..."

24) Cf. Obermiller II, Teramoto p. 402. The correct reading for a-bha-bhrām-šī should be a-pa-bhrām-ba, equivalent to Tibetan zur-chag-pa(-pa). Teramoto reconstructs it as Ababhāqa (for Ababhāṣī), which is not at all acceptable. Padma dkar-po reads A-ma-bhrām-ba (i.e. Abhārāṃśa) (cf. n. 25 below).

25) Cf. 'Brug-pa'i Chos-'byun of Padma dkar-po (folio 25a 2–3 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 49.2–3): skye-bo maI-n pos bkur-ba'i slob-dpon-gyi lugs ston-pos maI-ba-kur-ba / mkhan-po dmaI-n rigs ... ņe-bar-'khor / skad zur-chag-pa a-wa-bhrām-
4.4. . . . gnas-brtan-pa / mkhan-po rje rigs . . . ka-tya-na / skad 'brin-du
'don-pa / . . . (folio 90a4–5 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 811.4–5)28).
". . . the Sthaviras: The master was Kātyāyana, a Vaiśya . . . (They)
pronounced the language intermediately . . ."

5.1. Then Bu-ston refers to other sources on the Mahāsāṃghikas,
Sāṃmitiyas and Sthaviras (cf. 4.2–4 above):

kha-cig / phal-chen-pa skad 'brin-du 'don-pa'i skad / kun-gyis-bkur-ba
tha-mal-pa'i skad / gnas-brtan-pa zur-chag-tu 'dod-do / . . . (folio 90a 5–6 =
ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 811.5–6)27).

"Some [say]:—The Mahāsāṃghikas spoke the language, the language
(which they) pronounced intermediately, the Sāṃmitiyas the Prakrit
language, and the Sthaviras in the corrupted (manner) (i.e. Apabhramśa)
. . ."

6.1. In regard to the languages used by Indian Buddhists at the time
of earlier schisms Bu-ston has after all cited four theories, i.e. I (2.1),
II (3.1–2), III (4.1–4), and IV (5.1):

śa . . . "As (they) show the customs of the teacher honoured by many people,
(they are called) 'the Honoured-by-Many' (mañ-ba-(b)kur-ba, cf. kun-gyis-bkur-ba:
Skt. sam-man-, 'to honour'). The master was Upāli, a Śūdra . . . The language
was the corrupted Apabhramśa . . ."

28) Cf. Obermiller II p. 100, Teramoto p. 402. For skad 'brin-du 'don-pa
see 5.1 below. ka-tya-na is to be emended to kā-tyā-ya-na; cf. 'Brug-pa'i Chos-'byün
of Padma dkar-po (folio 25a4 = ed. Lokesh Chandra folio 49.4): . . . gnas-
brtan-pa / mkhan-po rje rigs . . . ka-tya-ya-na [read kā-tyā-ō] / skad 'brin-du 'don-
pa / . . .

27) Cf. Obermiller II p. 100, Teramoto p. 401. 'dod-do should most probably
be emended to 'don-no. Obermiller translates skad 'brin-du 'don-pa'i skad by
"the intermediate dialect", but Teramoto by "Chūgoku (Magadha)-go (the lan-
guage of the middleland, i.e. Māgadhī)" in which he seems to take 'brin, "middle”,
as meaning "the middleland, i.e. Madhyadesa"! (cf. Teramoto in 3.1 above).
This is by any means impossible and unacceptable. skad 'brin-du 'don-pa'i skad is
used in the same sense as bar-mar 'don-pa'i tshig (3.1) or as skad 'brin-du 'don-pa
(4.4). Tibetan 'brin or bar-ma must be used for something moderate in regard to
the quality and quantity—neither too large or loud (chen/che) nor too small or
low (chuñ), neither too strong or high (drag) nor too weak or low (zan). In this
case it denotes the language of moderate character with moderate hybridity.
At the same time it seems to me that the language also refers to the manner of speech,
that is to say, a language which is neither too harsh nor too soft, neither too loud
nor too low. By using such a language they must have attracted a wider audience.
The more active they were in propagation, the more their language must absorb
the neighbouring dialectal elements. This is a specific character of the languages
used in Indian religious texts, even in the Rgveda; cf. M. B. Emeneau, The
Dialects of Old Indo-Aryan, Ancient Indo-European Dialects, Berkeley-Los
Angeles 1966, p. 131. The most important thing in our text is that the language
of moderate character, no matter how one may translate it, refers to a language
compared with other dialects synchronically, and never diachronically. That is
to say, it denotes by no means the language in the intermediate stage of the Sanskri-
tization process; cf. A. Yuyama, Butten no Hensan ni Mochiireta Gengo no
Tokushitei (A Distinctive Character of the Languages Used by Indian Buddhists
in the Formation of the Canon), Studies in Buddhist Thought dedicated to J. Oku-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asokan period</th>
<th>Mula- sarvasti- vadins</th>
<th>Mahā- sāṃghikas</th>
<th>Sarmpitiyas</th>
<th>Sthaviras</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I: One theory</strong></td>
<td>Prakrit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apabhramśa</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pāśācī</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>II: Śākyaprabha</strong></td>
<td>Prakrit</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apabhramśa</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bar-mar 'don- pa'i tshig</td>
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<td>Rgya-chen- po'i skad</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>III: Padmākaraghoṣa</strong></td>
<td>Sanskrit</td>
<td></td>
<td>Prakrit</td>
<td>Apabhramśa</td>
<td>Skad 'briñ-du 'don-pa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV: Another theory</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Skad 'briñ-du 'don-pa</td>
<td>Prakrit</td>
<td>Apabhramśa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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6.2. At this stage it is not possible to judge if any of the theories transmits the historical truth. In the meantime Bu-ston’s work remains important as describing Indian traditions on the topic.