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052139726X - Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism

Steven Collins

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book is offered to the reader as an essay in the history of ideas. The particular tradition dealt with here is that of *Theravāda* Buddhism, a tradition whose ideas were conceived and elaborated in India and in certain Indian-influenced cultural settings in South and South-east Asia. In presenting my account of this tradition, however, I wish immediately to make two points. Firstly, in speaking of a ‘history’ of ideas here I will try to follow the advice and example of Louis Dumont (as indeed on many other occasions in this study): ‘The history of India must be read in an Indian way. It is better to seek first, by a synchronic study, to grasp the fundamental configurations or structure which constitute the framework in relation to which history – apart from the pure sequence of events – is defined.’¹ Secondly, although the particular subject-matter, and the treatment of it I have considered appropriate, are *prima facie* concerned only with India and with Buddhism, I hope very much that the book will be read with an awareness that this specialist Indological appearance is meant to be only skin-deep. Naturally, I have had to address myself to particular issues which the relevant scholarship, Indological and anthropological, has raised hitherto; indeed, I hope that on this level the book will be coherent simply as a contribution to the solution of certain classic problems in the study of Buddhist culture. However, my main interest is philosophical; the imaginative world of *Theravāda* Buddhism, and *a fortiori* of the Indian culture of which it is essentially a part, are of great depth and complexity, and their speculative thought derives from concerns and presuppositions radically different from those of western philosophy. Such an alien tradition, however, is important for us not *in spite of* but precisely *because of* these differences, and the difficulty we have in understanding them.

I think that a great deal of contemporary philosophy, particularly in the English-language tradition, suffers from a lack of historical and social self-awareness. I want to argue that philosophical reflection should not proceed in abstraction from intellectual history and anthropology, from the investigation and comparison of cultures. Just as anthropology hopes, by means of the ethnographic study of other societies, eventually to illuminate both the specific nature of our own society and the general nature of all societies, so I think our philosophy should hope eventually

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to illuminate both the specific nature of its own inherent concerns and presuppositions, and perhaps the general nature of human thought (if such exists), by studying the intellectual history of its own, *and of other* traditions. Let me quote the remarks of two anthropologists whose work has greatly influenced me. Louis Dumont, acknowledging the influence on himself of Marcel Mauss, writes:

Let us consider here another of Mauss' conclusions, whose importance might escape one because of the form in which it is expressed: 'Aristotelian categories are not the only ones which exist. We have first to make the largest possible catalogue of categories.' There is little doubt for those who know Mauss that 'make a catalogue' means nothing less than to experience those categories, to enter into them, to elaborate them into social facts If I am not mistaken, in anthropology, properly scientific categories are only born from a contradiction between our categories and the categories of others, from a conflict between theory and the data. I think that it is for this reason that Mauss did not want a philosophy, that is to say a speculation with insufficient concepts, but an inventory of categories equivalent to the construction of scientific concepts.²

Clifford Geertz, writing of the difficulties of a truly empathetic understanding, which would see things 'from the native's point of view', has the following to say, which is relevant both to the general intellectual position I am trying to describe, and to the particular topic of this study:

The concept of person is, in fact, an excellent vehicle by which to examine this whole question of how to go about poking into another people's turn of mind. In the first place, some sort of concept of this kind, one feels reasonably safe in saying, exists in recognizable form within all social groups. Various notions of what persons are may be, from our point of view, more than a little odd. People may be conceived to dart about nervously at night, shaped like fireflies. Essential elements of their psyche, like hatred, may be thought to be lodged in granular black bodies within their livers, discoverable upon autopsy. They may share their fates with *doppelgänger* [sic] beasts, so that when the beast sickens or dies they sicken or die too. But at least some conception of what a human individual is, as opposed to a rock, an animal, a rainstorm, or a god, is, so far as I can see, universal. Yet, at the same time, as these offhand examples suggest, the actual conceptions involved vary, often quite sharply, from one group to the next. The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe; a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. Rather than attempt to place the experience of others within the framework of such a conception, which is what the extolled 'empathy' in fact usually comes down to, we must, if we are to achieve understanding, set that conception aside and view their experiences within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is.³

I hope that the project of investigating the specificity of Buddhist thinking about self, persons, and their continuity, the task of coming to

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terms with the particular nature of its intellectual and social content, will help to enable us to hold up a mirror to our own thinking on these subjects. In the study which follows I will describe the way in which I think *Theravāda* thinking has arisen from its historical and cultural context. I will suggest that it embodies as a basis for thought certain specific conceptual constructions and hypotheses; constructions and hypotheses which are addressed to quite specific (and socially derived) concerns, all of which became finally crystallised, as it were, into a schematic religious dogmatism. Doing this, I hope, will help us to appreciate how western thinking about persons, selves, their nature and their activities, itself also represents a specific historical and cultural product, addressing its own particular concerns and embodying its own particular conceptual constructions and hypotheses as the basis for its thought. (The two crucial areas here, I suppose, are Christian soteriology and the individualist presuppositions of economic and socio-political thought.)⁴

There seems to me to be a strong tendency in contemporary philosophy – at least in some parts of the English-language tradition primarily influenced by Wittgenstein – to accord to different cultures, under the names perhaps of ‘forms of life’ or ‘language games’, a kind of immunity from external historical or sociological criticism and comparison. This tendency, exaggeratedly and self-protectively tolerant, is encouraged by the tacit but frequent assumptions that *for us* what one might call (paraphrasing Chomsky) ‘the intuitions of the native English thinker’ should be the arbiter of philosophical correctness, and that it is the conceptual and linguistic habits of ‘common-sense’ to which we should look for enlightenment on philosophical issues. The approach I am suggesting, on the contrary, will see these ‘intuitions’, and the ‘common-sense’ constructed out of them, as merely problematic data; data, moreover, whose implicit presuppositions and particular concerns must be investigated and made explicit by appropriate historical and social-anthropological scholarship. In the pages which follow I will try to confront the native English thinker with certain aspects of the mental universe as it appears to the Buddhist mind. The result of thus placing oneself, for a moment, in a Buddhist world (in Mauss’ terms of ‘experiencing Buddhist categories’), will be, I hope, to widen a little the cultural horizons in which both our common-sense and our philosophy set their ideas of the person and of selfhood. It is this fundamental project to which my study of Buddhism is directed.

So much for the content of the book: its form results from my approach to two classic problems in the study of Buddhism. In the first place, there

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is the doctrine of 'not-self' (Pali *anattā*, Sanskrit *anātman*). I will let three distinguished contemporary *Theravāda* Buddhists introduce the doctrine. All of them are writing in English for a western audience, and they show admirably, I think, the importance which the denial of self has for Buddhists themselves, and some of the perhaps unexpected implications and consequences which Buddhism supposes the opposing belief in the existence of a self to have. Rāhula, a learned and authoritative Sinhalese monk, writes:

What in general is suggested by Soul, Self, Ego, or to use the Sanskrit expression *Ātman*, is that in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world. According to some religions, each individual has such a separate soul which is created by God, and which, finally after death, lives eternally either in hell or heaven, its destiny depending on the judgement of its creator. According to others, it goes through many lives till it is completely purified and becomes finally united with God or *Brahman*, Universal Soul or *Ātman*, from which it originally emanated. This soul or self in man is the thinker of thoughts, feeler of sensations, and receiver of rewards and punishments for all its actions good or bad. Such a conception is called the idea of self.

Buddhism stands unique in the history of human thought in denying the existence of such a Soul, Self, or *Ātman*. According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine', selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egotism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.⁵

Malalasekera, an active Sinhalese lay Buddhist and statesman, tells us that:

this is the one doctrine which separates Buddhism from all other religions, creeds, and systems of philosophy and which makes it unique in the world's history. All its other teachings . . . are found, more or less in similar forms, in one or other of the schools of thought or religions which have attempted to guide men through life and explain to them the unsatisfactoriness of the world. But in its denial of any real permanent Soul or Self, Buddhism stands alone. This teaching presents the utmost difficulty to many people and often provokes even violent antagonism towards the whole religion. Yet this doctrine of No-soul or *Anattā* is the bedrock of Buddhism and all the other Teachings of the Buddha are intimately connected with it . . . Now, what is this 'Soul' the existence of which the Buddha denies? Briefly stated, the soul is the abiding, separate, constantly existing and indestructible entity which is generally believed to be found in man . . . it is [regarded as] the thinker of all his thoughts, the doer of his deeds and the director of the organism generally. It is the lord not only of the body but also of the mind; it gathers its knowledge through the gateways of the senses . . . Buddhism denies all this and asserts that this belief in a permanent and a divine soul is the most dangerous and pernicious of all errors, the most deceitful of illusions, that it will inevitably mislead its victim into the deepest pit of sorrow and suffering.⁶

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Nyanatiloka, a German who went to Ceylon, became a monk and a leading figure in modern 'reformed' Buddhism there, and who was a prolific translator and interpreter of *Theravāda* tradition, adapts a canonical pattern of exposition in saying that:

there are three teachers in the world. The first teacher teaches the existence of an eternal ego-entity outlasting death: that is the Eternalist, as for example the Christian. The second teacher teaches a temporary ego-entity which becomes annihilated at death: that is the annihilationist, or materialist. The third teacher teaches neither an eternal nor a temporary ego-entity: that is the Buddha. The Buddha teaches that what we call ego, self, soul, personality, etc., are merely conventional terms not referring to any real independent entity. And he teaches that there is only to be found this psychophysical process of existence changing from moment to moment . . . This doctrine of egolessness of existence forms the essence of the Buddha's doctrine of emancipation. Thus with this doctrine of egolessness, or *anattā*, stands or falls the entire Buddhist structure.⁷

I shall not be concerned to come to any final evaluation of the *anattā* doctrine, nor thus to decide whether 'the entire Buddhist structure' is to stand or fall. Rather, in examining the doctrine, I shall wish to elucidate how it appears in the texts, what it asserts, what it denies, and what it fails to assert or deny; and, perhaps most importantly, I shall wish to study what role or roles it plays in the varieties of Buddhist thought and practice, what function or functions it might have for those who profess allegiance to it and whose religious activity is patterned on it. The problems raised *for us* by the doctrine are naturally legion, and I shall try to show what, in the indigenous categories of Buddhist thought, corresponds roughly to an answer to them. Amongst other things, we will want to know how Buddhism can conceive or explain experience, action, and moral responsibility, without a real subject or agent; what rationale for action it can provide for the *Theravāda* practitioner himself; and – the main thread on which this book is woven – how there can be any coherent Buddhist account of personal identity and continuity, both in its general form, and in the particular case of rebirth (since of course Buddhism shares with all other major indigenous Indian religious traditions a belief in reincarnation).

The second classic problem which has determined the form of this study is that of 'Buddhism and Society'; more properly said, the problem of the relation between the content of Buddhist doctrine as it is found in the scriptural tradition of the Pali Canon and the other kinds of religious thought and practice found in what we call 'Buddhist societies'. This is, indeed, a problem which has had important repercussions in a wide intellectual sphere; along with the doctrine of not-self which we have just seen, Buddhism does not accept any idea of an omnipotent, eternal God, and although it accepts the existence of certain types of superhuman

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being, it does not accord any crucial religious value to human interaction with them. Thus, there is no place for worship, prayer, nor for many other things which are usually included *by definition* in the category of 'religion'. Durkheim's⁸ realisation of this, and his insistence that therefore 'religion in society' must be defined in some other way (in his case, in terms of 'the sacred and the profane'), has been very widely influential in social anthropology and in all comparative and historical study of religion. I am not at all concerned with the matter of definition; the important factor here is the ubiquitous co-existence of Buddhism with other more 'popular' forms of religious thought and practice which centre on rituals aimed at gaining some benefit or avoiding some threatened harm from local gods, spirits, and so on. Spiro⁹ has happily termed this 'culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings'. These rituals differ from place to place, and generally have little or nothing to do with canonical Buddhism. However, by far the largest proportion of those whom we call by any other criterion 'Buddhists' (or, more importantly, who call themselves 'Buddhists') happily integrate into their religious activities as a whole both practices oriented towards canonical Buddhism, such as feeding monks, and these other more 'popular' practices. Whatever the nature of the particular practices, moreover, the aim of them all is the future well-being of the person who performs them, or perhaps of another (such as a dead relative) to whom the 'merit' gained by the ritual is donated.

If these 'popular' Buddhist activities are to have any sense for those who participate in them, we must necessarily assume that, in relation to the person performing the ritual, to any possible recipient of 'merit', and to any gods or spirits to whom the ritual might be directed, there exists some feeling – not necessarily or even usually articulated – for the continuing existence and importance in this life and thereafter of oneself, of others, and of gods. Given the precisely contradictory doctrines of intellectual Buddhism, our interpretative problem might then be described as that of grasping adequately and holistically the relation of the stricter, intellectual kind of Buddhist thought and practice to the actual thought and practice of most Buddhists.

We are lucky to have seen, within the last decade, a number of anthropological studies which together provide a satisfactory intellectual framework in which we can take account of all the varieties of Buddhism found in Buddhist societies. (I shall return to this presently.) I should stress that I am not myself writing as an anthropologist. I am interested primarily in the thought of canonical Buddhism, and only secondarily with problems in the anthropological study of Buddhist society as it affects our understanding of that thought. Accordingly, my concern will

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be to investigate how the fact of social differences in thought and practice are taken account of by *Buddhist doctrine itself*, and how they affect it. That is, I shall study the question of whether and how the psychological and philosophical analyses of Buddhist thought ignore or include the dimension of social and individual differentiation. I can indicate the answer to this in a preliminary way now: not only does the intellectual tradition take account of what it imagines to be the social and psychological reality of actual Buddhists, but also it is precisely this dimension which gives us the key structures by which we will understand the *Theravāda* account of personality and continuity as it was developed, given the initial postulate of the denial of self.

Readers of the scholarly literature on these questions will no doubt be familiar with most of the arguments raised and positions adopted. I will here review briefly some of the most influential opinions, in order to situate my own account within the history of western scholarship.

With regard to the first problem, the denial of self, we can classify most opinions into two groups: those who refuse to believe that the 'real' doctrine taught by the Buddha is what the canonical teaching of *anattā* appears to be; and those who do accept that the doctrine of *anattā* is what the Buddha taught, and that it means what it appears to say, but who then deduce from it a final evaluation that Buddhism is 'nihilistic', 'pessimistic', 'world-' and 'life-denying', and so on.

In the former group, a number of different approaches have led to the same conclusion. Perhaps the most flamboyant was Mrs Rhys Davids, who achieved a great deal of sound scholarly work for the Pali Text Society but came finally to believe that these canonical texts do not represent the 'original gospel' of the Buddha. She began to claim that the Buddha taught the way to a 'More' in man; that is, an unseen self or soul, 'the very man', who was more than the visible 'instruments' of body and mind. Relying on what she saw as 'evidence . . . overlooked by Buddhists, whose ignorance of their Canon (only now in the process of translation into South Asiatic vernaculars) must be met with to be realized' she thought that it was

clear that the object of the utterance [i.e. one of the forms of the denial of self] was clearly to warn the new fellow-teachers never to identify the self, soul, very man with his parts or instruments, namely, body or ways of mind. They were to see that this (body, mind) 'is not of me, that I am not it, that for me it is not the self'. But the Buddhist inference from it has for centuries been the adding: this self being neither body nor mind, there is no self. Logically this is quite unwarranted.

She then asks 'How then is the self so oddly denied, denied even today, in orthodox Southern Buddhism?', and answers that it was the work of 'monasticism', which came to construe the doctrine as a 'pure nihilism',

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adding curiously that ‘no cult of that kind could long persist in India without dishonour and discredit’.¹⁰ Her husband, T. W. Rhys Davids, had remarked more soberly, some forty years earlier, that

the position [of not-self] is so absolute, so often insisted on, so fundamental to the right understanding of primitive Buddhism, that it is essential there should be no mistake about it. Yet the position is also so original, so fundamentally opposed to what is usually understood as religious belief, both in India and elsewhere, that there is a great temptation to attempt to find a loophole through which at least a covert or esoteric belief in the soul, and in future life (that is of course of a soul), can be recognised, in some sort of way, as part of so widely accepted a religious system. There is no loophole, and the efforts to find one have always met with unswerving opposition, both in the *Piṭakas* [i.e. canonical texts] themselves and in extra-canonical works.¹¹

A similar approach to Mrs Rhys Davids’ is followed by Christmas Humphreys, founder of the Buddhist Society in England, and whose voluminous writings on Buddhism have been very widely distributed and influential. Blending a background in theosophy with a particular view of the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist tradition (that is, Buddhism in Northern Asia), he feels of the *anattā* doctrine that

the difficulties in its understanding are inherent, for it is the Self which is striving to understand itself, and they are not made any easier by the persistent attempts of members of the *Theravāda* school, in the West as well as the East, to substitute a cold and dreary doctrine of their own which is unknown to the Pali Canon . . . Now, the Buddha nowhere denies the *Ātman* doctrine as originally taught [that is, as he has just explained, in the early Hindu texts, the *Upaniṣads*, where the *Ātman* is ultimately identical with the Cosmic Spirit, *Brahman*, which is ‘the absolute principle which is common to and unites man and the Universe’] but only in the degraded form of an ‘immortal soul’ which separates man from man.

Humphreys seems untroubled by any difficulties in understanding the doctrine, however, as the following entries in his *Popular Dictionary of Buddhism* make clear:

Ātman: The Supreme SELF;* Universal Consciousness; Ultimate Reality. The divine element in Man, degraded into idea of an entity dwelling in the heart of each man, the thinker of his thoughts and doer of his deeds, and after death dwelling in bliss or misery according to deeds done in the body. For Buddhist attitude to *Ātman* conception see *Anattā* (q.v.).

Anattā: The Doctrine of the non-separateness of all forms of life, and the opposite of that of an immortal and yet personal soul. As applied to man, it states

* As the quotations I give here show, in this context capital letters seem often to be imbued with profound and mysterious significance. Neither Sanskrit nor Pali script uses them, nor any equivalent, and so they are useless as an instrument for our interpretative understanding.

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that there is no permanent ego or self in the five *skandhas** which make up the personality. The Buddha, however, nowhere denied the existence of an ego or soul, but taught that no permanent entity, not subject to *anicca* and *dukkha* [impermanence and suffering] can be found in any of the human faculties. That which pertains to any human being is not immortal; that which is immortal and unchanging is not the possession of any one human being. The reality behind the flux of *samsāra* [rebirth] is an indivisible unity . . .¹²

Professor Zaehner, a converted Roman Catholic who confessed privately to finding Buddhism ‘an alien tradition’,¹³ was prevented by scholarly discipline from imputing quite so directly to Buddhists a belief their texts ubiquitously deny; but nevertheless, his view of Buddhism, conditioned by a Jungian-influenced sensibility to other religions, tended always to speak of the denial of self as merely ‘the elimination of ego’. This formulation leads the way for him, as for so many others, to suggest that there is a Self, or Real Self behind the (small) self or ego. Thus he speaks of ‘the Buddhist convention of using the word “Not-self” to mean something other than the Ego which has direct experience of both the subjective self and of objective phenomena’; and declares that ‘the Buddha . . . recognizes that there is an eternal being transcending time, space and change; and this is the beginning of religion. Moreover the Hindus, overwhelmingly, and the Buddhists when they are off their guard, speak of this eternal being as the “self”.’ (As if an entire cultural tradition could somehow adopt a deceptive pose!)

Modern intellectual Hinduism, reacting against the Christian missionary effort, has often claimed that ‘all religions are one’ – and that Hinduism is inexpugnably valuable because it alone recognises this fact. Exponents of this view generally follow the particular Hindu school called *Vedānta*, for which the essence of the human individual self, called *Ātman*, and the Ultimate Reality of the Universe, called *Brahman*, are the same; the approach is then that since all religions are ‘really’ saying the same thing, Buddhism’s denial of self must refer to a ‘small’, ‘selfish’ ego, and not to the magisterial cosmic *Ātman*. Thus, for Radhakrishnan, the Buddha ‘repudiates the popular delusion of the individual ego and disputes the reality of the surface self . . . It is the false view that clamours for the perpetual continuance of the small self that Buddha refutes.’¹⁴ Similarly Coomaraswamy finds that

there is nothing . . . to show that the Buddhists ever really understand the pure doctrine of the *Ātman* . . . The attack which they led upon the idea of self or soul is directed against the conception of the eternity in time of an unchanging individuality; of the timeless spirit they do not speak, and yet they claim to have

* Body, feelings, perceptions/ideas, ‘mental formations’, and consciousness. I shall discuss this analysis in Chapters 2 and 3.

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disposed of the theory of the *Ātman!* . . . Buddhist dialectic . . . is directed to show that things are 'Empty'; when their component elements are recognized, there is no remainder, but only the 'Void'; he who realises this, attains *Nibbāna** and is freed. But we cannot distinguish this 'Void' or 'Abyss' from that *Brahman* which is 'No thing'.¹⁵

Recently the Indian scholar K. Bhattacharya, in a work which quotes frequently from Radhakrishnan, Plotinus, Schopenhauer, Jaspers, and others, as well as from Indian and Buddhist texts, attempts to show that the 'Real', 'Absolute' (etc.) of all these systems is the same, indescribable 'spiritual *Ātman*', whose nature is best grasped and expressed by silence.¹⁶ It is, perhaps, as if entering a room full of people sitting in peaceful (or exasperated!) silence, one were to be able to conclude that they were all thinking 'the same thing'.

As I shall discuss in Chapter 3, perhaps the most frequent way in which the denial of self is presented in the texts is by placing the word *anattā*, 'not-self' in apposition to terms referring to any or all of the perceivable and conceivable aspects of human beings. Thus, for example, 'consciousness is not-self'.† The way is then open for interpreters to claim that if X Y Z (body, consciousness, or whatever) are 'not the self', then the self can, or must, be something else. This argument has been put forward by many scholars, a notable example in Germany being Georg Grimm, himself a Buddhist enthusiast.¹⁷ The justifiably renowned Austrian scholar Frauwallner¹⁸ followed a similarly common, though less positive, path in taking *anattā* as merely the strategic denial of any definite description of self, without affirming or denying the existence or non-existence of some transcendent, indefinable self. Like many others, he emphasised the occasional remarks in the texts to the effect that there is no point in discussing the problem of the existence or non-existence of the self, or the Buddha, after enlightenment, since such discussion is useless, or indeed a positive hindrance, to actual religious practice. Thus, finally, Buddhist metaphysics could be reduced to a kind of pragmatic agnosticism in which the self is not so much denied as declared inconceivable. *Anattā* then simply advises against uselessly trying to conceive it.

These examples will perhaps suffice to show something of the variety of positions adopted by those who see some other 'real' doctrine or attitude behind those apparently intended by the teaching of *anattā*. The other kind of approach, which accepts that in doctrine and attitude the denial of self is what it appears to be, but which then charges Buddhists

* The Pali form of Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*.

† See Chapter 3.2.1 for discussion of the linguistic form of *anattā*, and the possibilities for translation.