

The Compassion Network

Buddhist Canonical Texts

A Continuation of Records of Preeminent Monks (excerpts)

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彥琮言之八備:

誠心愛法,志願益人,不憚久時,其備一也;
將踐覺場,先牢戒足,不染譏惡,其備二也;
荃曉三藏,一貫兩乘,不苦暗滯,其備三也;
旁涉坟史,工綴典詞,不過魯拙,其備四也;
襟抱平恕,器量虛融,不好專執,其備五也;
耽于道術,淡于名利,不欲高炫,其備六也;
要識梵言,乃聞正譯,不墜彼學,其備七也;
薄閱蒼雅,粗諳篆隸,不昧此文,其備八也。

Yancong (557 - 610 A.D.) on Eight Preparatory Steps for Translators:

*To love the Dharma with a heart sincere,
and vow to aid all beings far and near,
with patience steady through each passing year—
this is the first requirement here.*

Preparing to step onto the Bodhimanda vast,

*hold firm the precepts, pure and steadfast;
unstained by slander, upright to the last—
this is the second virtue held fast.*

*Master the Tripiṭaka and both Vehicles' views,
Great and Small teachings joined without misuse;
unchecked by doubts that hinder or confuse—
this is the third that translators must use.*

*Study ancient histories, refine your written art,
let no crude awkwardness obscure the sacred part;
nor unpolished prose betray an unlearned start—
this is the fourth requirement of the heart.*

*Keep an even mind, composed, impartial, free,
with spacious tolerance and calm equity;
without rigid grasp or fixed obstinacy—
this is the fifth degree of harmony.*

*Devoted to the Way, aloof from wealth and fame,
refraining from display or boasting of one's name;
content in quiet virtue, steady in one's aim—
this is the sixth within Yancong's frame.*

*Be well-versed in Sanskrit so meaning stays exact,
preserve their learning whole, with scholarship intact;
no loss of foreign wisdom, with nothing subtracted—
this is the seventh rule enacted.*

*Consult ancient lexicons, with seal and clerical care,
know native forms so Chinese meaning stays laid bare;
unignorant of classical texts within our written sphere—
this is the eighth to keep the vision clear.*

彥琮論及道安之五失本三不易：

有五失本三不易也：一者胡言盡倒而使從秦，一失本也。二者胡經尚質，秦人好文，傳可眾心非文不合，二失本也。三者胡經委悉，至於歎詠丁寧反覆，或三或四不嫌其繁。而今裁斥，三失本也。四者胡有義說，正似亂詞。尋檢向語文無以異，或一千或五百。今並刈而不存，四失本也。五者事以合成將更旁及，反騰前詞已乃後說而悉除此。五失本也。然智經三達之心，覆面所演。

聖必因時時俗有易，而刪雅古以適今時。一不易也，愚智天隔聖人巨階，乃欲以千載之上微言，傳使合百王之下末俗。二不易也，阿難出經去佛未久，尊大迦葉令五百六通迭察迭書。今雖千年而以近意量截，彼阿羅漢乃兢兢若此。此生死人平平若是，豈將不以知法者猛乎。斯三不易也。

On Daoan's Five Departures from the Original and Three Difficulties:

The Five Departures

1. Reversed Syntax: Foreign (Indic) speech reverses word order when adapted into Chinese—this is the first departure.
2. Stylistic Polishing: Foreign scriptures value plain simplicity, while Chinese readers prefer literary refinement. To reach a broader audience, translations must be polished—this is the second departure.
3. Excising Repetition: Foreign scriptures are exhaustive, repeating chants and refrains three or four times without concern for redundancy. Editing these repetitions away is the third departure.
4. Removing Structural Summaries: Foreign texts contain summary codas that recapitulate preceding passages. Sections of five hundred or a thousand words often differ only slightly, yet translators cut them entirely—this is the fourth departure.
5. Omitted Recapitulations: After a narrative is complete, foreign texts branch into secondary details, returning to reiterate earlier statements before moving forward. Omitting these recapitulations is the fifth departure.

The Three Difficulties

1. Adapting Ancient Wisdom to Present Customs: *The Wisdom Sūtras (Prajñāpāramitā)* stem from the Buddha's enlightened mind of Threefold Insight¹ to meet the needs of an

¹ Threefold Insight (三達; Skt. *trividyā* / *abhijñā-jñāna*): The "Three Clear Insights" or "Threefold Divine Insights" attained by an enlightened Buddha: (1) knowledge of all past lives (*pūrvenivāsānusmṛti*), (2) the divine vision observing the death and karmic rebirth of all beings (*divyacakṣus*), and (3) knowledge of the total destruction of all spiritual defilements and delusions (*āsravakṣaya*). Daoan highlights Threefold Insight to demonstrate that foundational scriptures like *the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* (Zhijīng, 智經) emanate directly from an omniscient, transcendent state of awareness—making any attempt by mortal translators to edit, trim, or rewrite them an undertaking fraught with immense spiritual responsibility.

earlier age. Secular customs change, requiring ancient prose to be adapted for contemporary readers without losing its truth—this is the first difficulty.

2. Bridging the Sacred and the Secular: A vast gulf separates the ignorant from the wise, and the sage's mind is difficult to attain. Transmitting subtle words spoken a thousand years ago to suit the diminished customs of later dynasties—this is the second difficulty.

3. Translating *Arhat*-Verified Scriptures with Mortal Presumption: Ānanda compiled the *sūtras* shortly after the Buddha's passing, and Mahākāśyapa instructed 500 *arhats* with supernormal powers to cross-examine and record them with trembling care. A millennium later, ordinary translators crop and measure these scriptures by shallow modern views. When *arhats* approached the task with such reverence, how can those who truly understand the Dharma not treat this responsibility with utmost trepidation?—this is the third difficulty.