

# **Introduction to Pāli**

**Sutta Central**  
**(Gair and Karunatillake)**

Class 1  
10/11 March 2024

**Teacher: John Kelly**

## **Class Outline**

- **Introductions and Resources**
- **Pāli Language Features**
- **Pāli Alphabet and Pronunciation**
- **Noun (and Adjective) Components**
- **The 8 Cases in Each Noun Declension**

## Introductions

- **Everybody, please briefly introduce yourself in the Zoom chat, as follows**
  - Name (first name will do, or whatever you prefer to be called)
  - SC @handle
  - Geographical Location
  - First language (if not English)
  - Pāli Grammar learning experience, if any
- **Example**
  - John Kelly, @johnk, Brisbane, Australia
  - Pāli experience: self-taught since 2002, completed books: De Silva, G & K, Warder, assisted Bhikkhu Bodhi, taught several Pāli classes – two in person and two online

## Introductions

- **Myself and my Pāli Background**
- **Assistant Teacher – Stephen Sas**
- **Students in my previous Pāli class**
  - @BethL
  - @Dheerayupa
  - @Karuna
  - @Sumana [An]
  - @asci [Alan]

## Grammar Reference Material

- **Steven Collins, *A Pāli Grammar for Students***
  - Published 2005, Silkworm Books
- **Wilhelm Geiger, *A Pāli Grammar***
  - First published (in German) 1916
  - Available online
  - Very thorough and dense but a good reference for later in your Pāli studies [Collins calls it “irreplaceable”]
- **Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Reading the Buddha’s Discourses in Pāli***
  - Published 2020, Wisdom Publications

## Useful Online Resources

- **Sutta Central – Bhante Sujato’s translations all available with Pāli text side-by-side or line-by-line**
- **PTS’s Pāli-English Dictionary (PED), online:**  
<https://dsalrv04.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/>
- **Digital Pāli Dictionary (DPD), online:**  
<https://digitalpalidictionary.github.io/>

## Useful Online Resources

- Digital Pāli Reader (DPR), online:  
[https://www.digitalpalireader.online/\\_dprhtml/index.html](https://www.digitalpalireader.online/_dprhtml/index.html)
- Using the SC Forum – Discourse  
<https://discourse.suttacentral.net/c/events/pali-course/30>

## Pāli Features versus English

- Pāli is an Indo-European language
- Pāli is an inflected language
  - The words change basic shape according to their function in the sentence
- English (also an Indo-European language). Old English came from same inflected roots as Pāli did, but Modern English now has only traces of inflection remaining
  - Personal pronouns (I, me, he, him, she, her, etc.)
  - Possessive [Genitive] case (the girl's book = the book of the girl)
  - Plural forms in –s, -es, and irregular (e.g. children)

## Pāli versus English (cont.)

- Hence word order carries importance in English
  - A headline of ‘Man bites dog’ is very different to ‘Dog bites man’
- But not so important in Pāli
  - **naro sunakhaṃ ḍasati** ‘man bites dog’
  - **naraṃ sunakho ḍasati** ‘dog bites man’
  - While the essential words are the same the endings tell the function in a sentence

## Pāli versus English (cont.)

- The verb is *usually* last in a sentence
  - Standard English order is S-V-O
    - Subject – Verb - Object
  - Standard Pāli order is S-O-V
    - Subject – Object - Verb
    - A little like Yoda speak: ‘The boy many questions asks’

## Pāli versus English (cont.)

- The verb is *usually* last in a sentence
  - Standard English order is S-V-O
    - Subject – Verb - Object
  - Standard Pāli order is S-O-V
    - Subject – Object - Verb
    - A little like Yoda speak: ‘The boy many questions asks’
  - But Pāli is much more flexible in word order than English since inflection makes meaning clear
  - Often altered for emphasis, or to fit poetic metre

## Pāli versus English (cont.)

- There are no definite or indefinite articles in Pāli
  - no equivalents to ‘the’ or ‘a’
- Forms of “to be” are usually omitted (“copula”)
  - **buddho ācariyo** [The Buddha *is* a teacher]
  - **avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā** [From the condition of ignorance *there are* volitional formations]

## Pāli versus English (cont.)

- Personal pronouns are rarely used as subjects for verbs (only for emphasis)

– The verb ending indicates 1st, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3rd person

gacchāmi	I go
gacchasi	you (sg.) go
gacchati	he/she/it goes
gacchāma	we go
gacchatha	you (pl.) go
gacchanti	they go

## Pāli versus English (cont.)

- There are many long compound words
  - Compounds are *very* common, far more so than in English, and can be quite complex
  - avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā saṅkhārāpaccayā viññānaṃ ... jātipaccayā jarāmarāṇaṃ sokaparidevadukkhadomanassupāyāsā sambhavanti
  - avijjā-paccayā saṅkhārā saṅkhārā-paccayā viññānaṃ ... jāti-paccayā jarā-maraṇaṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanass-upāyāsā sambhavanti

## Pāli versus English (cont.)

- Pāli can use a noun where we might use a verb and vice versa
- Clear distinction between classes of words and grammatical functions is often not made
- Pali nouns all have a (grammatical) gender – *masculine, feminine, or neuter* – with not necessarily any correlation with *natural* gender

## Other Pāli Features

- Pāli frequently uses negative expressions when the meaning is positive  
e.g., *alobha, adosa, amoha*
- Some types of passive expressions are very common
- Some words are never first in a sentence (enclitics or clitics)
- Use of vocative in nearly *every* sentence in conversation
- The Pāli Canon features lots of repetition and stock phrases

## Pāli Alphabet

40 letters – 8 vowels, 25 consonants, 7 other (semi-vowels, liquids, sibilants, etc.)

Vowels: a, ā, i, ī, u, ū, e, o

Consonants:

[Unvoiced, Unvoiced Aspirate, Voiced, Voiced Aspirate, Nasal]

Gutturals: k, kh, g, gh, ṅ (ṅ) (also called Velar)

Palatals: c, ch, j, jh, ñ

Cerebrals: ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh, ṇ (also called Retroflex)

Dentals: t, th, d, dh, n

Labials: p, ph, b, bh, m

Other: y, r, l, l, v, s, h

## Pāli Pronunciation Guide

- Of the vowels, *e* and *o* are long before a single consonant and short before a double consonant
  - evaṃ me sutam *versus* mettā
  - soka *versus* soṭṭhiṃ
- Among the consonants, *g* is always pronounced as in “good” (never as in “giant”),  
*c* as in “church” (never as in “cat” or “race”),  
*ñ* as in “onion”, “canyon”

## Pāli Pronunciation Guide (cont.)

- The cerebrals (or retroflexes) are spoken with the tongue on the roof of the mouth; the dentals with the tongue on the upper teeth
- The aspirates—*kh, gh, ch, jh, ṭh, ḍh, th, dh, ph, bh*—are single consonants pronounced with slightly more force than the non-aspirates, e.g., *th* as in “Thomas” (not as in “thin”); *ph* as in “putter” (not as in “phone”)

## Pāli Pronunciation Guide (cont.)

- Double consonants are always enunciated separately, e.g., *dd* as in “mad dog,” *gg* as in “big goat,” *nn* as in “unnecessary” – think of it as a slight pause
- The pure nasal (*niggahīta*) *ṃ* is approximately pronounced like the *ng* in “song”, also approx. like the *n* in French “bonjour”

## Pāli Pronunciation Guide (cont.)

- There is no natural “stress” in Pāli pronunciation [as we have in English, e.g. the word pronunciation], but it is somewhat simulated by the important distinction made between **short** and **long** syllables.
- A long syllable is formed when the vowel is long: *o, e, ā, ī, ū*, or when it ends with a double consonant, a conjunct consonant, or an *ṃ*
- All other syllables are short

## Pāli Pronunciation Guide (cont.)

- Long and short vowels, single and double consonants, aspirate and non-aspirate **do matter** in both pronunciation and meaning
- Compare *kāma* and *kamma*
  - (sensual pleasure / action)
- Compare *atha*, *attā*, *attha*, and *aṭṭha*
  - (then, now / self / gain, welfare / eight)

## Pāli Pronunciation Guide (cont.)

- Pāli pronunciation is very consistent
- Since Pāli was for a long time a spoken and chanted language before it was ever written down
- Unlike English, which for a non-native speaker is a nightmare!
  - How many different ways to pronounce the following string of letters ‘ough’?
  - though, through, rough, cough, bough, ought, hiccough, lough ...

## Features of Pāli nouns (and adjectives)

- Pāli Nouns occur in:
- A Stem form:
  - The base from which other forms are derived
  - In dictionaries and glossaries, nouns are listed in their stem form
- Three Genders: Masculine, Feminine and Neuter
- Two Numbers: Singular and Plural
- Eight Cases:
  - Nominative, Accusative, Instrumental, Ablative, Dative, Genitive, Locative, Vocative

## Use of the Cases

- **Nominative**: The most common use of the nominative is as the subject of a sentence
  - *naro passati*
- **Accusative**: The most common use of the accusative is as the object of a verb in a sentence
  - *naro puttam passati*
  - The goal of motion is also expressed by the accusative case
  - *naro gamam gacchati*

## Use of the Cases (cont.)

- **Vocative**: The vocative is used in calling or addressing
  - *bhikkhave!* O, monks!
- The other five cases are commonly the equivalent of English prepositions – e.g.,
  - Instrumental     *by, by means of, with*
  - Ablative         *from*
  - Dative            *to, for*
  - Genitive          *of*
  - Locative         *in, on, about*

## Declension of nouns

- All nouns in Pāli are declined, that is their endings change according to the function that noun serves in a sentence
- Each noun belongs to a particular declension group where endings are consistent
- There are quite a number of Declension groups to learn which are all based on the noun's stem form and gender
- The most common declension group in Pāli is that of nouns of masculine gender with stem ending in -a

## Homework – Class 1

- Review Gair and Karunatillake
  - Introduction, Pages xi through xvi
- Study G & K Lesson 1
  - Glossary (pages 2-4)
  - Grammar (pages 4-11)
- Work through Lesson 1 Readings and write down your answers (pages 1-2)