Some Notes on Literature and Language

Some Languages of Buddhism

An interesting feature of Buddhism is that we have reason to believe that its teachings were transmitted across languages incredibly early in its life; early Buddhist sources report the Buddha himself saying that his teachings should be transmitted in the language of one's audience, and not in any 'original' language that was given special privilege.
It is worth introducing some of the most important languages in the history of Buddhism, which will be relevant in the materials that follow. We generally follow the convention that when writing non-English words these should be italicized (e.g., *ātman*), unless these are proper nouns (e.g., Śākyamuni), *unless* the proper noun is the name of a work of literature (e.g., *Dhammapada*).

Sanskrit

Sanskrit is a language of privilege in India, and likely has been for the better part of three thousand years. It is the language of important Hindu literature (the Upaniṣads and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example) as well as thousands of other significant Indian works besides, including a great deal of very significant Buddhist literature, dating back at least two thousand years.
When discussing ideas from India, which has always been home to a vast number of different languages, scholars will often use Sanskrit terminology, for the sake of simplicity. The word *karma* is Sanskrit, so too *nirvāṇa*. Our materials will often use Sanskrit terminology.
However, these examples show an added complexity: Sanskrit Buddhist words are sometimes absorbed into English. Since karma and nirvana are now English words they can be used without italics or diacritics.

Pali / Pāli

Pali is a language related to Sanskrit, also from India, but which has a special place in the history of especially Theravāda Buddhism. The Theravāda version of the Buddhist canon, or collection of sacred literature, is the only version of an Indian Buddhist canon that survives complete in an Indian language, namely Pali. This is what is commonly called 'the Pali Canon', and is also known by the name *Tipiṭaka*, referring to the 'three baskets' or three categories of teachings included therein. First written down in perhaps the first century BCE, this is a hugely important source for early Buddhist teaching. Other Theravādin literature from later centuries, mostly produced in Sri Lanka, was composed in Pali also.
Pali terminology resembles the corresponding Sanskrit, but with some differences. For example, Sanskrit *karma* corresponds to Pali *kamma*; Sanskrit *nirvāṇa* corresponds to Pali *nibbāna*; the Buddha's birth name in Sanskrit is Siddhārtha Gautama, and in Pali Siddhattha Gotama.
Do not worry about these differences. Ideally, if one is referring to or teaching from the Pali Canon, one might use Pali terms; otherwise Sanskrit is fine, and very common in literature about Buddhism.

East Asian Languages

Buddhist teachings spread across Central Asia well before the year zero, and in the early Common Era made progress east into what is modern day China. For around a thousand years after this, Chinese scholars translated into Chinese vast amounts of Buddhist literature from India and elsewhere, with special attention to literature belonging to the Mahāyāna tradition.
We will only use Chinese terminology when referring to aspects of specifically Chinese Buddhism, and occasionally also Japanese when referring to Buddhism there.

Tibetan

Among the most impressive programmes of translation in the history of world literature was begun in the seventh century in Tibet, where scholars from Tibet and India began translating hundreds of Buddhist works from Indian languages into Tibetan. Today the greatest quantity of Buddhist literature from India, especially with respect to Mahāyāna Buddhism, survives in Tibetan translation, alongside a vast amount that was written in Tibetan also.
As with Chinese, we will only use Tibetan terminology when referring to aspects of specifically Tibetan Buddhism.

Pronunciations

Indic languages, such as Sanskrit and Pali, use a range of sounds slightly different to those commonly reflected by the English alphabet. When written, we commonly employ diacritics, or 'accents', to distinguish between subtly different characters in these languages.
The pronunciation guide below, while not an exhaustive list of all sounds found in Indic languages, may be useful when reading aloud transliterated words from Sanskrit or Pali.

Vowels

The line across the top of a vowel indicates it must be lengthened, so:

a as in *b**u**t*, or *A**m**erica*
ā as in *f**a**ther*
i as in *t**i**p*
ī as in *s**ee***
u as in *p**u**t*
ū as in *fl**u**te*

There are also five other common vowels in Sanskrit:

e as in *c**a**ve*
ai as in *p**ie***
o as in *p**o**le*
au as in *c**ow***
ṛ as in *d**ri**p* (classified as a vowel in Sanskrit)

Consonants

The Short Version

The key differences from what you might expect from English pronunciation are:

c is always pronounced *ch* as in ***ch**air*
h after any consonant is an aspiration, so for example:
    th is like in *po**th**ole* (Theravāda is pronounced more like 'terra-vaada')
    ph is like in *cu**ph**older*
ś and *ṣ* are pronounced *sh* and are often written *sh* when diacritics are not used

The Long Version

A consonant followed by an h is 'aspirated', so:

b as in ***b****at*, or *la****b***
bh as in *a****bh****or*
c as in ***ch****air*, or *bea****ch***
ch as in *bea****chh****ead*
d as in ***d****og*, or *mu****d***
dh as in *mu****dh****ut*
g as in ***g****ame*, or *do****g***
gh as in *do****gh****ouse*
j as in ***j****ar*, or *he****dge***
jh as in *he****dgeh****og*
k as in ***c****at*, or *ba****ck***
kh as in *ba****ckh****and*
p as in ***p****et*, or *cu****p***
ph as in *cu****ph****older*
t as in *po****t***
th as in *po****th****ole*

A dot underneath indicates a 'retroflex' sound, made with the tongue curled over and touching the roof of the mouth. In practice, the sounds are not easily distinguished and you can pronounce it as if the dot was not there, so:

ḍ as in ***d****art* (nearly indistinguishable from *d*, above)
ḍh as in *a****dh****ere* (nearly indistinguishable from *dh*, above)
ṭ as in *s****t****art* (nearly indistinguishable from *t*, above)
ṭh as in ***Th****ames* (nearly indistinguishable from *th*, above)

There are multiple nasals ('n's and 'm's) in Sanskrit, with slightly different sounds. The *ṃ* can also be used to stand in for other nasals in spelling words, for example, you will find both *saṅgha* and *saṃgha.*

m as in ***m****ap*
n as in ***n****ose*
ṅ as in *wro****ng***
ṇ as in *hi****n****t*
ñ as in *o****ni****on*, or *ca****ny****on*

There are also three different types of 'sibilant' (s):

s as in ***s****and*
ś as in ***sh****one*
ṣ as in ***sh****ine* (the difference from the *ś* is very slight)

Other letters:

h as in ***h****at*
ḥ as in ***h****oof* (primarily just an exhalation)
l as in ***l****eg*
r as in ***r****ed*
ṛ is in *d****ri****p* (see 'vowels', above)
v as somewhere between ***w****et* and ***v****et*
y as in ***y****ell*

Some Literary Sources for Buddhist Teaching

There is a vast amount of literature that Buddhists around the world take to be authoritative, or we might say consider to be 'sacred'. While most Buddhist traditions will admit that Buddhists the world over are all legitimate followers of *some* Buddhist teachings, they will nonetheless disagree with respect to what literature constitutes the most important (or even 'true') word of the Buddha.
It is worth introducing some of the broad categories of literature that Buddhists take to be authoritative, and which will be treated as sources for Buddhist teaching in the materials that we have provided.

The Pali Canon

Many different Buddhist 'canons', or collections of works taken to be authoritative, circulated India and beyond before the modern era. Of these, only one collection remains extant in an Indian language, is particularly old in its content, and is at the heart of a living religious tradition. This is the Pali Canon, revered by Theravāda Buddhists (concentrated in Sri Lanka and across Southeast Asia), and is a particularly important source for studying early Buddhist ideas in a language that was used to promote them over two thousand years ago.

The Pali Canon is sometimes called the 'Tipiṭaka' or 'Three Baskets', given that it consists of three divisions (themselves also sub-divided many times):

* *Sutta Piṭaka* – the basket (in other words 'collection') of 'discourses' (*sutta*; Sanskrit *sūtra*), preserving hundreds of teachings, on just as many matters, attributed to the Buddha at different points in his life. It is in this content that one will find many passages worthy of study if one wants to understand foundations of Buddhist thought and practice.
* *Vinaya Piṭaka* – the basket of 'discipline' (*vinaya*; Sanskrit identical), preserving hundreds of regulations, and stories surrounding them, for the organization of Buddhist monasticism and the correct behaviour of its monks and nuns. In effect, this is monastic 'legal' literature, traditionally attributed to the Buddha and dating back well over two thousand years
* *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* – the basket of 'doctrines' (*abhidhamma*; Sanskrit *abhidharma*), preserving many sophisticated discussions of the finer points of Buddhist teaching, building upon content of the discourses.

To explore content of the Pali Canon, and especially content of the *Sutta Piṭaka*, one could use this website:
https://www.accesstoinsight.org/

Other early scriptures

Although the Pali canon of the Theravāda school is the only set of scriptures preserved in its entirety, there were many other schools of early Buddhism that have not survived to the present as living traditions, and each had their own versions of scripture. Some individual texts from these schools survive, either in Indic languages such as Sanskrit, or as translations that were made into Chinese or Tibetan as Buddhism spread. These surviving texts include some of the finest examples of Buddhist narrative literature, and so sometimes feature in our materials.

Mahāyāna Sūtras

Mahāyāna Buddhism, which has taken many forms in India and elsewhere, recognizes the authority of hundreds of discourses (*sūtra*s), all attributed to the Buddha, that teach things beyond anything we might find in the Pali Canon or other scriptures of the earliest period. Scholars consider Mahāyāna discourses to have been produced by Buddhists in centuries after the Buddha's death, perhaps beginning around the start of the Common Era; traditionalist Mahāyāna institutions – for example, today, in Tibetan and across East Asia – understand that these were simply written down around this time, but nonetheless report authentic, additional teachings by the Buddha. As we discuss elsewhere in these worksheets, Mahāyāna Buddhism and its texts promote the idea that sentient beings should strive not simply to attain *nirvāṇa*, but rather to be *bodhisattva*s, or beings who are intent upon becoming *buddha*s themselves.

There are many hundreds of Mahāyāna discourses that survive from India, extant either in Sanskrit or often, because Indian versions are lost to us, just in translations made into Chinese and/or into Tibetan sometime in the first millennium CE. East Asian Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists have their own canons of Buddhist materials, different from one another and far larger than the Pali Canon, that collate and organize large numbers of Mahāyānist discourses, along with commentaries on these produced either in India or elsewhere.

Mahāyāna Buddhists recognize the authority of the Pali Canon and its content, but consider it to be incomplete from the perspective of people who wish to be bodhisattvas. Theravāda Buddhists reject the authority of teachings beyond what is in the Pali Canon, but generally acknowledge that Buddhists everywhere are at least attempting to follow some articulation of Buddhist teaching, albeit with some flaws or misunderstandings.

Translations from Chinese versions of many Buddhist works, including many Mahāyāna discourses, are published for free online by the organization Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai (BDK):
https://www.bdkamerica.org/the-translation-project/
Translations from Tibetan versions of many Buddhist works, including many Mahāyāna discourses, are published for free online by the 84,000 Project:
https://84000.co/

Modern texts

The amount of ancient and classical literature preserved in the Pali Canon, in the Chinese Buddhist canon and the Tibetan canon – to say nothing of still other important works not in these collections – is vast. And yet if one is studying Buddhism beyond Asia, and also in the twenty-first century, one should consider also works by modern Buddhist authors, which are often more widely read than traditional, 'canonical' literature.

One could consider, for example, the writings of the Indian Buddhist leader B.R. Ambedkar, whose works are of the utmost importance for Buddhists in India today, or books for a global audience by authors including the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hahn or the fourteenth (and current) Dalai Lama.

Although our materials will focus on Buddhist literature that have some connection to Buddhism in India, and in the first thousand years of its history, perhaps consider also the value of looking at modern Buddhist literature, which arguably has just as much of an impact (if not more so) on modern Western audiences.