

# Returning to the Source

In March 2009, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche delivered a stirring message to a gathering of Tibetan Buddhist translators, urging them to reconsider their priorities for the future. Rigpa translator **Adam Pearcey** reports on a conference that left those who attended with enough work for the next twenty-five years—and beyond.



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## TRANSLATING THE WORDS OF THE BUDDHA

KHYENTSE FOUNDATION  
TRANSLATION CONFERENCE

For five days in March, several lamas and many of the world's leading Tibetan Buddhist translators came together at the splendid Deer Park Institute in the Himalayan foothills of Northern India for *Translating the Words of the Buddha*, an impeccably organized conference that was several years in the planning. The aim was to discuss the current state and future direction of Tibetan Buddhist translation, but as we arrived few of us had any idea what to expect.

From the very beginning, however, it was clear that this would be an extraordinary event. For one thing, there was our spontaneous audience with the Gyalwang Karmapa while en route to Bir. Then, there was the unprecedented gathering of illustrious lamas and translators, including Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche, Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, Doboorn Tulku Rinpoche, Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche, Ven. Matthieu Ricard,

Robert Thurman and Gene Smith—so many luminaries, in fact, that some of us worried that an act of sabotage or a stray missile might set back the transmission of the Dharma to the West by several decades.

But, above all, there was Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's defining and momentous keynote speech. Standing before the Institute's magical Manjushri statue, modelled on one of the most sacred images in Tibet, he announced: "The stakes are high. It's our generation who will shoulder the responsibility for ensuring that the Buddhadharma continues to flourish in the world. We need to make a thorough and effective plan for the future, and we must put it into action."

Both Khyentse Rinpoche and the conference chairman, Dzogchen Pönlop Rinpoche, wasted no time in revealing what that plan would be. Rather than focus on the



**The conference was held at Deer Park Institute in Bir, northern India, against the dramatic backdrop of the Dhauladar Himalayan ranges.**

Photograph courtesy of David Kittelstrom



**Top: Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche sets the tone for the conference with his momentous keynote speech. Above: Translators from around the world vote to set five, twenty-five and hundred-year goals.**

Photographs courtesy of John Solomon

works of Tibetan masters—as we had all largely been doing up to that point—they suggested we must turn our collective attention and resources to the vast Tibetan Buddhist canon, comprised of the *Kangyur*, the ‘Words of the Buddha’, and the *Tengyur*, the commentaries (*shastra* in Sanskrit) of the great Indian masters.

Khyentse Rinpoche told us frankly: “If I were given the chance to set our priorities, what would be the top of my list? Without doubt I would have to say that the teachings of the Buddha—the sutras—should take precedence over the shastras. Then, as the shastras written by Indian authors are more authoritative and carry more weight, I would say that they should be translated before those of the Tibetan authors.”

“Painful as it is for me to admit,” he continued, “Tibetans often promote the teachings of their own teachers far

more than those of the Buddha... Today, as a result, our vision is quite narrow, and instead of dedicating our limited resources to translating the ‘Words of the Buddha’, we pour them into translating the teachings of individual lineage gurus, their biographies, their long-life prayers, and prayers for the propagation of the teachings of individual schools.”

Dzogchen Pönlop Rinpoche, in his speech, told us: “It would be quite ironic to claim to be a Buddhist but have no idea what the Buddha taught.” It is therefore crucial, he said, that western Buddhists have access to the words of the Buddha.

Later in the week, His Holiness the Dalai Lama also spoke to us of the importance of a return to the Buddha’s own words and especially the classical Indian commentaries. Candid as ever, he explained that the writings of the Indian masters contained



in the Tengyur are indispensable aids to understanding the words of the Buddha, and more applicable to the modern world than the works of later Tibetan teachers. "Tibetan authors," he said, "often took it for granted that their writings would be read by Buddhists, whereas the Indian masters never took that for granted, leading to a big difference in how their teachings were presented... Indian masters, like Nagarjuna, Dignaga and Dharmakirti, presented the Buddha's teaching through reasoning and logic, which is why they are so relevant to today's world, in which many people are sceptical about religion."

Excitement was generated on the second day of the conference when we received a letter from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche announcing that his Dharmachakra Translation Committee would appoint fifteen full-time translators to the project of translating the Tibetan canon. Then, in a second message,

this time on video, he went on to say that his group would commit to translate the entire Tantra section of the Kangyur. This precipitated a unique wave of 'bidding', as other lamas made similar commitments on behalf of their groups and individual translators volunteered to work on particular texts. Buoyed and emboldened by all these pledges, which made the plan seem that much more realistic and achievable, we somehow set a goal of translating the entire Kangyur, and a substantial portion of the Tengyur and related Tibetan commentaries—amounting to perhaps as many as two hundred large volumes in total—within the next twenty-five years.

Outside the plenary sessions there were group discussions on issues like translator training, resources, funding and peer review. Many of these topics were also addressed informally, during mealtimes and especially on the long bus rides to and from Himachal

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**DZONGSAR KHYENTSE RINPOCHE**



**Above: Dzogchen Pönlop Rinpoche addresses the conference. It is crucial for western Buddhists to have access to the words of the Buddha in their own languages, he told translators.**

Photograph courtesy of John Solomon

**Opposite: Conference participants in front of a replica of one of Tibet's most sacred images of Manjushri. The lamas seated in the row second from the back are (from left to right): Khenpo Kalsang Gyaltsen, Doboomb Tulku Rinpoche, Dzogchen Pönlop Rinpoche, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche and Tulku Pema Wangyal Rinpoche.**

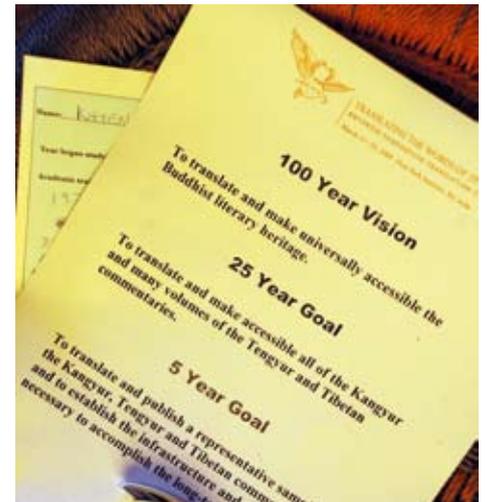
Photograph courtesy of Matthieu Ricard

Pradesh. There was obviously much to talk about and far too little time to cover it all adequately, but steps were taken towards establishing what Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche called "an ongoing conference... that never closes because all the attendees continue to consult and work together."

As the days unfolded, there was a growing sense that we were witnessing history in the making, an impression that had little to do with the reporters and photographers, the team of bloggers offering instant updates on our progress via the internet, or the slightly incongruous Bhutanese television crew clad in their traditional robes and knee-length socks. By the close of proceedings, we had created something provisionally called the Buddhist Literary Heritage Project, with Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, after repeated requests, agreeing to be its leader. We had finalized goals for the next five, twenty-five and one hundred years, and drawn up a long list of pledges from the various translators and groups involved. Messages of support had come from the president of Taiwan and the prime minister of Bhutan, and more than eleven thousand people had signed an online petition expressing their gratitude for our work. At the precise moment that we completed our conference resolutions, a clap of thunder resounded loudly overhead.

From start to finish, everything had gone auspiciously, and there were indications of greater collaboration among translators than ever before. In his closing remarks, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche told us that the conference had made the importance of translating the Kangyur and Tengyur more vivid and obvious. This itself, he said, had been a genuine accomplishment. In a manner befitting the heirs of the Rimé movement, the lamas had argued for a shifting of priorities, and we had all been convinced. The decision to host the conference in India now made perfect sense: we were, in every way, returning to the source of the Dharma.

Photograph courtesy of Corey Kohn



## The Goals of the Buddhist Literary Heritage Project

### 100-Year Vision

To translate and make universally accessible the Buddhist literary heritage.

### 25-Year Goal

To translate and make accessible all of the Kangyur and related volumes of the Tengyur and Tibetan commentaries.

### 5-Year Goal

To translate and publish a representative sample of the Kangyur, Tengyur and Tibetan commentaries, and to establish the infrastructure and resources necessary to accomplish the long-term vision.

## Conference Resolutions

We resolve to make every effort to invite the participation of the masters and holders of all lineages, and to invite the many translators who were not present in this conference to join us in this effort.

We resolve that the interim director of the Buddhist Literary Heritage Project shall be Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche.

We humbly request Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche to select, in consultation with key advisors, the leaders and members of the working committees who will create the structures necessary for this project.

We resolve and request that the Khyentse Foundation provides administrative support for the initial phases of this project.

We resolve to develop all the tools and resources necessary to achieve the goals decided on in this conference.

We resolve to undertake this project in the spirit of universal Buddhist fellowship, drawing on the wisdom of accomplished masters throughout the Buddhist world.