



TRANSLATING THE WORDS OF THE BUDDHA

KHYENTSE FOUNDATION TRANSLATION CONFERENCE

March 15–20, 2009 Deer Park Institute, Bir, India

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's Keynote Address:

“Translating the Words of the Buddhadharma for
Hearing, Contemplation and Meditation”

Monday, 16 March 2009, 09.00

Whenever people have asked me about the purpose of this conference, I've found myself saying something rather vague and evasive. I do understand that conferences are usually expected to follow a specific agenda; the problem is there's so much we need to talk about, that I've found it extremely difficult to pinpoint where to start. At the same time, it's precisely because there's so much to talk about that this conference is being held.

One of the first Tibetan translation conferences ever happened about twenty years ago as a result of the efforts of Doboorn Tulku Rinpoche. More recently a very successful "Conference of Translators" hosted by Light of Berotsana was held in Colorado, which included discussions about founding a translator's guild, which I found extremely encouraging. I'd like to see many more of this kind of conference in the future.

For now, though, we need to set the agenda for this conference, and rather than limiting ourselves to examining and discussing all the short-term projects and issues we're currently facing as individuals, I'd like us to take a much broader view. I'd like to suggest that over the next few days we start the process of mapping out exactly what needs to be done during our lifetimes and beyond in order to ensure the preservation of the Tibetan Buddhist sacred texts. Basically, our agenda is to write the agenda for an ongoing translation conference; a conference that never closes because all the attendees continue to consult and work together in pursuit of a common goal.

For decades now, a few individual lamas and translators like yourselves, have been putting a great deal of effort into translating Tibetan Buddhist dharma texts into various languages. What's more, you've been doing it in spite of the almost total lack of support translation work receives, and always under the pressure of needing to produce material quickly. Actually, it's quite amazing what's been achieved—and yet, you have almost always worked alone.

As we consider what will need to be done for the sake of the future of the Buddhadharma, I think it'll become clear that we have to aim a little higher than merely translating the odd book here and there. In fact, I believe that the only way for us to achieve the enormous task we face is by finding ways of working together—not only the translators, but also the sponsors, the teachers and, of course, the students, who are the real beneficiaries of your work. Over the years, such collaborations have been rare, and it's an aspiration of mine that we'll be working together far more closely in the future.

Of course, this tendency towards working alone may have something to do with the habits of Tibetan lamas. Generally speaking, working in a group isn't common amongst Tibetans, and particularly amongst the lamas.

Why go through all the pain and agony of working with other people when you don't have to? After all, two human beings trying to work together always slows a process down and is often frustrating. And for quite a number of projects, it simply isn't necessary. So, as long as the tasks we undertake are small enough to be completed by just one person, or one school, or one particular lineage, being individualistic isn't a problem.

Unfortunately, though, there are projects that, by their very nature—for example, their enormous size or complexity—simply cannot be achieved by individuals or even small groups of translators. And I believe that translating a large portion of the Buddhadharma—by which I mean all the texts that were brought from India to Tibet more than a millennium ago—from Tibetan into modern languages, is such a project.

Although I can see that there's so much that needs to be discussed, I myself am not a translator. In fact, I've never even translated one page of text, let alone an entire book! Yet, for some peculiar reason, I find myself associated with this Translation Conference—mostly, I think, owing to the involvement of Khyentse Foundation. And I imagine that this situation is a little worrying for some of you real translators, since enthusiastic amateurs tend to be rather naïve about the art of translation. Most naïve of all, of course, are the Tibetan lamas, like myself.

So, out of this naïve and inexperienced head of mine, I have come up with some areas of discussion that I would like to propose for this conference. They are:

- To identify the challenges faced by those translating Tibetan Buddhist texts into modern languages, for example how to train future generations of translators, and how to attract the very necessary attention of the Rinpoches;
- To examine the financial and infrastructural support available for translation work—or should I say the lack of it; and also
- For all of us to be aware of where we are right now in this process of translating the Tibetan texts for the modern world, and to think about where we would like to

be in 2109 which also involves heightening our awareness of just how urgent and precarious the situation has become.

When this conference was first announced, many people responded positively and were very encouraging. But, understandably, a few were apprehensive, wondering things like, “Is this another of those Tibetan conferences where everyone is expected to be polite and agree about everything?” or “Is this another of those pointless conferences where a bunch of hard-headed translators dig their heels in, and insist on doing things their way, regardless of what anyone else says?” Some translators have even declared, quite openly, that they, “Only work alone”, and simply, “Don’t believe in ‘conferences’.”

I’ve also heard that some mischievous people have been speculating that the purpose of this conference is to ensure the translation of the Kangyur, and nothing else; and that translations of texts that are needed more immediately will be shelved completely. I would be surprised, though, if this rumour had really worried any of you. A thousand years ago the great Dharma Kings and Patrons had absolute, dictatorial power and great wealth, and were able to direct a scholar to drop everything and focus entirely on one project—like the translation of the Kangyur. But those days are long gone, and such a thing certainly couldn’t happen today—unfortunately.

Anyway, in spite of the many dilemmas translators face there is one thing of which I am absolutely certain: we must translate.

You’ll probably think I’m exaggerating, but I feel it’s entirely possible that the survival of Tibetan Buddhism could depend on its translation into other languages.

Personally, I find it hard to fathom the attitude of those Tibetan lamas who expect those who want to study and practice the Buddhadharma, first to perfect the Tibetan language. I can see that right now it’s important for some people learn Tibetan, but how necessary will it really be in a hundred years time?

Fundamentally, the Buddhadharma and Tibetan culture are two different things, and just because someone is interested in Buddhadharma doesn’t mean that he or she aspires to be a Tibetologist.

Whenever Kyabjé Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche spoke of the gratitude Tibetans should feel for the great Dharma patron, King Trisong Deutsen, he would say that, even if we Tibetans covered our entire world with solid gold and offered it to the King, it wouldn’t be enough to repay even a fraction of what we owe him for his extraordinary kindness—and he wasn’t referring to King Trisong Deutsen’s social or political triumphs. It is believed that the project awarded the highest level of funding in King Trisong Deutsen’s national budget was that of completing the task of translating the Word of the Buddha into Tibetan.

Enormous as the financial investment was, money was not the only price the

Tibetans paid. Hundreds of the devoted students who attempted the journey to India to receive teachings and gather Buddhist texts, died from the terrible heat, strange food and virulent diseases they encountered on the Indian plains. Yet, in spite of the tremendous human sacrifice and unimaginable cost borne by the crown, this single undertaking may well be the one truly phenomenal Tibetan accomplishment.

One reason for prioritizing translation work is that we must, of course, continue to make available sacred Buddhist texts for the benefit of those non-Tibetans who wish to study and practice Buddhadharma. However, this is not the only reason for us to put all our energy into producing well-translated texts.

The Buddhist heritage and culture that permeated Tibetan life for more than a thousand years, has all but disappeared in India, its country of origin. Basically, the great Lotsawas who translated the Buddhist texts into Tibetan—where Buddhism continued to flourish for a millennium—effectively rescued the Buddhadharma from premature extinction. As a result, today, what had been virtually lost in India can now be found in Tibet—and what's more is becoming available again in India.

As inauspicious as it may sound, when we look at the current situation of Tibet, and the waning enthusiasm amongst Tibetans themselves for their own language and culture, it's clear that the same kind of virtual obliteration of Buddhist culture could quite easily happen again.

And I believe that, by translating the Tibetan Buddhist texts into modern languages, you may well be saving a vast swathe of Buddhist civilization and culture from global annihilation. The living traditions of Dharma that still exist today—for example, in Japan, China, Thailand and Burma—have only survived because they had the foresight to translate the original sacred Buddhist texts into their own languages.

In addition, as many of you know, those in the Tibetan community still able to speak and understand classical Tibetan are extremely rare. At the rate at which the language is disappearing, 50 years from now there will be almost no Tibetans who can read the words from texts such as the Kangyur and Tengyur and understand their meaning. And very soon it will be too late to do anything about it.

So, for all these reasons, when I learned that Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche aspires to translate the Kangyur into English, I felt tremendously encouraged.

Translating the Kangyur is, of course, a massive and extremely daunting task, and while it's not the sole purpose of this conference, neither is it a project we can afford to ignore.

As very few Tibetans read or study the Kangyur these days, there are those who

wonder if it's really worth the effort—especially taking into consideration the enormous amount of resources such a translation project would involve. Amongst Tibetans, as you know, the Kangyur is widely used as a merit-making object: monasteries will certainly buy a copy, but will then simply shelve it. If offerings are made the text will be read out loud, but little effort will be invested in understanding the meaning of each word.

While paying homage to the Words of the Buddha is a powerfully meritorious spiritual act, the Tibetan habit of using the Kangyur solely for this purpose is neither to be admired nor emulated: in fact, it's a big mistake. I've noticed that Chinese, Thai and Burmese Buddhists still read the Sutras and contemplate them; the Tibetans rarely do. My concern is that if we decide not to translate these texts, this Tibetan mistake will be both reinforced and perpetuated.

Every religion has an original holy book—for Christians it's the Bible, and for Moslems it's the Koran. For Buddhists, our root holy books are the Sutras and they are of vital importance, because what Buddha taught us must always be the final word on any given subject, not what we find in the Shastras—and definitely not what's to be found in the Tibetan commentaries.

As Buddhadharma is taught more widely in the modern world, where attention to detail and authenticity are so valued, people are going to want to know what Buddha, himself, actually said. The trend today is for teachers, priests, scholars, politicians and fanatics to obscure the original meaning of important texts by interpreting them in a way that supports their own personal agendas—it's happening in all religions, and sadly, Buddhism is no exception. When problems created by such interpretations arise in the future, our beacon of truth can only be the Words of the Buddha.

If you were to ask someone naïve, like myself, what I think should be translated? 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.

The Tibetans have developed the habit of preserving and propagating the work of Tibetan lamas, and seem to have forgotten about the Sutras and Shastras. Painful as it is for me to admit, Tibetans often promote the teachings of their own teachers far more than those of the Buddha—and I have no trouble understanding why Tibetan Buddhism is sometimes described as “Lamaism”. 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 it into translating the teachings of individual lineage gurus, biographies, their long-life prayers, and prayers for the propagation of the teachings of individual schools.

These are just some of my reasons for believing that translating the Kangyur and Tengyur are projects that, at the very least, we must address and plan for right now. The way I see it, this immense translation effort can only be accomplished if we all join forces. Basically, we have to work together. And, more than anything else, we need to establish an ongoing dialogue and spirit of cooperation and mutual support amongst translators and all those implicated in the art of translation, and start planning for the future—what I’ve already described as an ‘on-going conference’. We need to decide where we want this process to be in 10 years, 25 years, 50 years and 100 years.

If just one person were to try, rather stubbornly, to shift a huge boulder on their own, all that would be achieved is a terrible drain on his energy and time—and most likely the boulder wouldn’t move an inch. The cooperative effort of a dozen people, though, could move the boulder quite easily. By working together as a group to move our own huge and immovable boulder, I believe that, at the very least, we’d be able to work out how to be more efficient, and how to use our resources more wisely.

While we are constantly aware of the urgency of the situation, I should add that we would be deceiving ourselves if we imagined that this generation of translators will see the completion of this project. In Tibet, it took seven generations of Tibetan Kings to accomplish the translation of the texts we have today; and some believe that there are still sutras and shastras that have yet to be translated into Tibetan.

What we must do, however, is lay the foundations, by devising a practical and far-sighted plan to ensure that, eventually, everything that should be translated, will be—and we have to do it now.

The challenge of translating volumes of Tibetan texts the size of mountains is only one aspect of the enormous task we’re faced with; there are others equally daunting that we need to start thinking about. For example, revising and updating existing translations into current, everyday language. It’s an unnerving prospect, I know, but the sacred texts must always be available in a form the present generation can understand.

And there are other issues like, who does the best job, the scholar-translator or the practitioner-translator?

When we encounter the more inscrutable passages from the Buddha’s teachings, it is usually to the interpretations of the great practitioners that we turn. If a practitioner-translator is our ideal because he or she has greater emotional authority than a scholar-translator, we should also remember that many of these great practitioners aren’t particularly well-versed in Buddhist philosophy. They even take pride in their lack of worldly knowledge, for example in their literary skills, telling us that they’re glad they didn’t waste their time studying ‘all that

intellectual stuff"! And worse still, it is well-known in Tibet that often not only the practitioners, but even the scholars—the Geshe and Khenpos—didn't know how to write their own names, let alone a whole sentence. So, imagining we can rely on the linguistic expertise of these great beings, may be a little over-optimistic.

We also have the problem of dealing with the excruciating modern phenomenon of 'political correctness'. Can we really translate *arhat* as the 'destroyer of enemies'? Can this literal translation really help students understand its true meaning? Especially these days, when such a phrase could so easily be confused with the language of religious fanaticism. Consequently, not only do scholars play a vital role in the process of translation, but so do the arbiters of social sensitivities; and their roles are at least equally important to that of the practitioner, and definitely not less.

We also need the help and advice of good editors and writers, so that we can ensure the language the text is being translated into is well written. Just because someone can understand Tibetan, doesn't mean that they can write well in their own language. Take English, for example. As we all know, the way Tibetan is written is very different from English, but I wonder, is using a kind of pidgin-English to reflect the Tibetan style a good solution? Wouldn't it be better for the native English translators to pay more attention to perfecting their written English style, so that they can represent Tibetan ideas in a way that their readers can understand?

Insignificant as it may sound when compared with what we have yet to achieve, I've noticed that few translators have been able to render many prayers and practices from Tibetan into other languages and retain the metre necessary to be able to chant them easily. And so, practitioners inspired by traditional forms of chanting, usually do so in Tibetan. I think we should start thinking about how we can produce prayers in other languages—particularly those usually practiced in groups—that are written in metre so that students can chant in their own languages.

Although it's true that we have not been blessed with great Dharma patrons like King Trisong Deutsen, all is not lost because modern technology is on our side. The great translator Vairochana, when he needed to find a specific manuscript, had to walk from Tibet to India, and it took him several months. Today, thanks both to modern technology and projects like Gene Smith's TBRC, it's possible to download Tibetan texts to your computer, even from somewhere as remote as Bir—if the internet is working, of course.

I believe the process we begin here could now continue online quite easily in an ongoing conference of ideas and mutual support. And we shouldn't limit who we bring into our conversations. Not only should we be talking to other translators,

but also to all those who support the translation process, the teachers, the linguists, the writers, and, of course, the students.

By opening up the lines of communications between ourselves, we could start working out how we can help each other more efficiently.

You know, every time I visit Manhattan Island, I am amazed by the foresight of those Americans who created that part of New York City. They had such vision! The way they planned the layout of the streets and avenues, Central Park, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it's as if they knew what would be needed in the 20th century, and beyond. This kind of visionary planning is absolutely necessary in order to achieve our goal.

Therefore, I would like to call on all of you here today—the translators, the Rinpoches and the sponsors—to aspire to be as visionary as those great New York City planners. After all, what we are going to do will have a far greater impact on the world than the laying out of a city ever could. We will be making available to people of all nationalities, everything they need to follow the Buddha's infinite path to liberation, which is the only source of true happiness and enlightenment.

And so I entreat you, please, we must learn to work together. The stakes are high, and, practically speaking, it's our generation who will shoulder the responsibility for ensuring that the Buddhadharma continues to flourish in this world. We need to make a thorough and effective plan for the future, and we must put it into action.

As a Tibetan, I am amazed when I read texts by the great Lotsawas, like Vairochana and Chogroluyi Gyaltsen, and remember just how much I, personally, owe them. They endured unimaginable hardships to bring the Buddhadharma from India to Tibet. Without their compassionate determination, their devotion and sheer hard work, I would never have been able truly to appreciate the words of the Buddha in my own language.

We are being given the opportunity to emulate those great beings—the translators, scholars, panditas and saints of the past—by taking on the task of translating and making available the Words of the Buddha to as many people in this world as possible, in their own languages, now and for centuries to come.