

# TRANSLATING AND TRANSFERRING BUDDHIST LITERATURE: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

A workshop organized by the CIRDIS doctoral college (IK) “Cultural Transfers and Cross-Contacts in the Himalayan Borderlands” and the Khyentse Foundation Buddhist Translation Studies Program

Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies,  
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Convened by Prof. Dr. Klaus-Dieter Mathes and Mag. Gregory Forgues

## ABSTRACTS

This workshop will address practical concerns of Buddhist translation studies in relation to the methodological approach being developed within the IK Cultural Transfers program on issues of transference and translation of Buddhist literature.

New approaches to cultural history emphasize the importance of the process of translation in the transmission and reception of texts between source and target cultures. ‘Cultural translation’ focuses on the practice of translation as a medium to transfer key ideas between cultures. In this context, translation is not merely a one-to-one linguistic rendering of concepts and representations. It is understood as a cross-cultural production process of meaning through which the original text is interpreted, reinterpreted, altered, or distorted.

In the case of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist translation studies, the complexity of translating texts into modern languages is compounded by the fact that this process is the result of a double cultural transfer between Sanskrit and Tibetan, as well as source languages and modern languages.

This workshop will provide an opportunity for in-house scholars and academics from abroad who have been working on related projects to collaborate and discuss Buddhist translation as a mode of transference. Issues related to textual and philological analysis as well as methods of translation with regard to equivalence at and above word level, textual and pragmatic equivalence, semantic and lexical aspects, transposition, word order, and stylistics will be addressed by the participants.

This workshop will explore and map relevant translation issues with the aim to define a methodology for training professional translators of Buddhist literature.

CHAIR: KLAUS-DIETER MATHES

9:00 *Towards Mapping Translation Issues and Methods in Buddhist Studies*  
Mag. Gregory Forgues

This paper explores how corpus-based and computer-assisted translation methods can benefit ‘Buddhist Translating Studies’ as well as provide a theoretical grounding for ‘translating as a practice’ and training translators.

Large corpora of Buddhist texts still remain untranslated. However, some of them have recently been digitized in various formats, such as unicode, enabling the use of corpus-linguistics methods.

Translating as a transfer from a source culture to a target culture through language implies multiple simultaneous processes of transformation on linguistic, textual, philosophical, and cultural planes. To complexify the matter, specific processes of cultural transmission and transformation, resemanticization, and cultural appropriation can also be identified within Buddhist works themselves.

The aim of this paper is to suggest a methodological approach for a corpus-based discourse analysis of large corpora of Buddhist literature. Due to the sheer size of some Buddhist corpora of texts, drawing

inferences on the basis of specific or isolated occurrences of technical terms without fully understanding their usage in their own cultural and textual context can prove to be methodologically unsound.

Corpus-linguistics and corpus-based translation methods provide a solution to this quandary and represent a promising methodological approach for a better understanding of Buddhist thought and practices.

9:20 *Cultural Transfer and Translation*  
Prof. Martin Gaenzle

The process of cultural transfer has been conceptualised in many different ways, each with its own theoretical baggage and problems. Compared to such terms as “acculturation”, “hybridisation” or “creolisation”, the notion of translation seems rather straightforward and technically precise. Thus it is no surprise that already early on anthropologists have made use of the term to speak more generally about “cultural translation”. However, as professional translators well know, the work of translation is fraught with practical as well as theoretical problems too, and so one may ask: does the metaphorical use of “translation” get us any further? My contribution tries to clarify the utility of the idea of “cultural translation” and also gauge its limits.

9:40 *Mindfulness in Translation*  
Dr. Martina Draszczyk

A primary goal of translation is to transmit ideas from one language and sometimes even culture to another with a minimum of distortion. But can there be a perfect translation given that both in the source and the target language terms undergo changes in meaning and usage? And what if the term in the target language develops a life of its own? At which point can it no longer be endorsed as a translation of its original source? “Mindfulness” as today’s more or less standardized English rendering of the Pāli term *sati* and its Sanskrit equivalent *smṛti* in the context of meditation practice has become a buzz-word in an area far beyond the domain of Buddhism. This paper looks at the question: To what extent does the secular use of this term reflect the original usage of *sati* or *smṛti* or has the transmutation into “Mc-mindfulness” generated its own dynamics and applications?

10:10 *Task of the Tibetan Translators: Navigating Semantic Change*  
Dr. David Higgins

Words change in meaning over time. Words may lose meanings (semantic obsolescence), gain meanings (semantic accretion), and in certain instances assume opposite meanings (semantic inversion). Words may also broaden or narrow in semantic scope or even usurp the semantic domains of other words (semantic displacement). In the more controlled languages of scholarly discourses, such shifts in meaning and scope may be augmented by more deliberate efforts to reinterpret the senses of terms for a variety of doctrinal or tactical purposes. It may be observed that deliberate semantic transformations of this kind have played a central role in the doctrinal history of Indian Buddhism, beginning with the formative attempts to give new meanings to well-known pan-Indic religio-philosophical terms such as *dharma*, *karman* and *mokṣa*, and continuing through a long succession of reinterpretations of key Buddhist terms according to changing doctrinal and doxographical contexts. This paper draws on the resources of lexical semantics (a branch of historical linguistics that looks at how and why words change meaning) to consider how early Tibetan translators and lexicographers responded to the problem of polysemy (the co-existence of many possible meanings) in certain Sanskrit terms. More specifically, it focuses on a set of translational strategies that were employed, as part of the broader project (initiated in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE) of devising a new Dharma language (*chos skad*) for the translation of Indian Buddhist texts, to render certain terms from the source language that had acquired a wide range of different, and sometimes divergent, meanings over their long conceptual histories. It concludes by considering as pertinent examples of this problem of polysemy certain terms for cognition that presented special challenges to early translators because of their wide range of context-specific meanings.

## 10:40 Coffee Break

CHAIR: GREGORY FORGUES

### 11:00 *Translations that Make Sense* Dr. Pascale Hugon

Based on two examples from the Buddhist epistemological corpus – an Indian commentary on one of Dharmakīrti’s major works and a section from a Tibetan indigenous text – I raise the provocative question whether efforts at translating the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist corpus into modern European languages should address just every text – in particular the ones that were translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan, according to the frequently heard argument that “if the teams of Indian and Tibetan translators could do it, we can (and therefore should) do it, too.” The question, I argue, is not whether we can translate these texts, but whether it makes sense to do so. One must, in this regard, consider an aspect that often does not get enough attention: the intended usage to be made of the translated version by prospective readers.

Provided the previous question is answered positively, I explore which kind of translation would be best suited to my two examples. I contend that a classical literal translation, whether abundantly annotated or not, would gain in the cases under consideration at being not just completed, but replaced by a non-literal, possibly radically non-classical translation liable to make sense on its own, and I adduce some suggestions in this regard.

### 11:30 *Translated, Transferred or Transcreated? Remarks on a Dohakośa attributed to Kaṇha* Prof. Matthew Kapstein

Although its history remains unclear, a very well known, short collection of Indian Mahāmudrā texts within the modern Bka’-brgyud traditions is the *Do ha mdzod brgyad*. My presentation will raise some questions about the provenance and composition of this anthology, focusing on just one of the works within it: the *Do ha mdzod* of Nag-po-pa, or Kaṇha as he is known in the cognate Indian traditions. In particular, I wish to examine this work in its possible relation to the problem of “gray texts” as has been raised by R.M. Davidson, D. Martin and others in connection with the transmission of certain Indian works to Tibet during the early second millennium.

### 12:00 *Translating Prakāśa and Prabhāsvara: Standardizing Buddhist Terminology in Translation* Casey Alexandra Kemp MPhil.

The process of standardizing terminology continues to be negotiated by translators of Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhist literature into English, which in part is due to issues of translation authority. One such example of this negotiation process is that we find in modern Buddhist scholasticism the terms ‘luminous’ or ‘luminosity’ to be used to translate the Sanskrit terms *prabhāsvara(tā)* as well as *prakāśa(tā)*. *’Od gsal (ba)* is the most common Tibetan translation for the Sanskrit term *prabhāsvara*, while *gsal (ba)*, although having multiple grammatical functions according to context, is the most common translation for the Sanskrit term *prakāśa*. Both terms have been translated by multiple scholars as ‘luminous’ and are often used implicitly in English renderings as interchangeable concepts. Although these two concepts do share some semantic similarities, when we look more closely into the usage and context in which these two terms function in a Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhist context, we can see that they are two distinct concepts. This point is essential to consider in order to provide consistent and accurate translations of ‘philosophical’ terms and to help minimize arbitrary or inaccurate renderings into English. After providing various examples that highlight this problem, I will attempt to argue for the standardization of English terminological equivalents for these two terms. It is my hope that consistency and clarification will help to minimize misinterpretations of these complex concepts related to Buddhist ‘philosophies’ of mind.

## 12:30 Lunch Break

CHAIR: CASEY KEMP

14:00 *Translating Tibetan Translations: Considerations and Questions*  
Dr. Anne MacDonald

The transposition of Buddhist texts into modern languages requires that the individual undertaking the task reflect on and repeatedly make decisions concerning questions related to fidelity and license in style and language, and be aware of the risks – and in some cases advantages – of inflation, deflation, innovation, deformity, domestication, mystification, and so forth. He/she must also attempt to deal with the much more imposing challenges inherent to the cultural transfer of linguistic signifiers and ideas, taking into consideration differences and assumptions in the receptor-language audience's conceptual environment. Given the recurring gaps in correspondence between the Indo-Tibetan domain and the modern world, especially as regards philosophical expression and understanding, one is not infrequently faced with translating into a vacuum. The paper will touch on these general problems and introduce to the discussion further issues specific to the process of translating Canonical Tibetan texts.

14:30 *Textual Criticism and Translation: A Complex Passage in 'Gos Lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal's Commentary on the Dharmadharmatāvibhāga*  
Prof. Klaus-Dieter Mathes

'Gos Lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal (1392-1481) introduces the second chapter of his *Ratnagotravibhāga* (RGV) commentary by explaining the *dharmatā* chapter of the *Dharmadharmatāvibhāgakārikās* (DhDhVK), in which the abandonment of the four sets of characteristic signs is taken to go hand in hand with the cultivation of non-conceptual wisdom. 'Gos Lo claims that this is achieved by not becoming mentally engaged (*amanasikāra*) as explained in the *Nirvikalpapraveśadhāraṇī* and then goes on to contrast two ways of how this is put into practice: the analytic path of Kamalaśīla and Sahajavajra's direct *mahāmudrā* approach. In his commentary on the *Tattvadaśaka*, Sahajavajra claims that his direct approach is a form of Pāramitānaya that accords with Mantranaya. The *Tattvadaśakaṭīkā* and 'Gos Lo's elaborations on it are of great importance as they provide later *mahāmudrā* masters with grounds for distinguishing between *sūtra*- and *mantra-mahāmudrā* traditions.

It will be shown that a careful comparison of the quotations with the bsTan 'gyur, the bKa' 'gyur (our *Tattvadaśakaṭīkā* passage quotes the *Samādhirājasūtra*) and the Sanskrit is necessary not only for critically assessing 'Gos Lo's line of thought, but also for correctly understanding and translating his Tibetan. On a related note, I will demonstrate how the reading of canonical Tibetan with a Sanskrit syntax in mind helped to identify a quotation from the *Abhidharmakośa*, i.e., the definition of *saṃjñā* as the grasping of a characteristic sign (AK I.14cd). This in turn is essential to our understanding of how Sahajavajra interprets the verses on *saṃjñā* from the *Samādhirājasūtra* (SRS XXXII.92-97) in order to explain how one can directly abandon characteristic signs by becoming mentally disengaged.

15:00 *How Can Buddhist Thought Be Brought Back to Life? Buddhist Scriptures, Terms, and Translation*  
Prof. Akira Saitō

Translation is of enormous importance in the field of humanities. This is not limited to the reception of religious thought, philosophical texts, and literary works of foreign provenance, and it can be readily understood if one looks at the translation of many so-called classics into modern languages. Especially in the case of religious thought and philosophical texts, a proper understanding of key terms is extremely important. The first prerequisite when attempting to translate such works is a proper understanding of key terms in the context in which they appear in individual works while also taking into account the historical background in terms of culture and intellectual thought. Next, the translator is faced with the need to

select equivalents in the language into which he is translating that are both reliable and as finely nuanced as possible. When a suitable equivalent cannot be found in the existing lexicon of the target language, he may resort to loanwords (e.g., bodhisattva, arhat, samādhi, Buddha, and nirvāṇa), or to coining new words (such as Chinese yuanqi 緣起 for Sanskrit pratītyasamutpāda, foxing 仏性 for buddhadhātu, jingjin 精進 for vīrya, and zhongsheng 衆生 for sattva).

As is well-known, during the course of the history of Buddhism, spanning more than 2,400 years, Buddhist texts were translated directly from Indic languages into other languages (if one excludes translations into modern languages) only in China, from the second century A.D., and in Tibet, where they were translated as a state-sponsored undertaking from the second half of the eighth century. In later times Chinese translations were further translated, in a broad sense of the term, into Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, etc., while Mongolian translations were produced on the basis of Tibetan translations. In addition, the Pāli scriptures were transcribed and translated into Sinhalese and the languages of Southeast Asia, and since the nineteenth century translations have been made from Sanskrit, Pāli, and other Indic languages into modern languages.

In the following, I shall begin by briefly surveying, in line with the topic of this paper and with reference to some actual examples, the characteristics of Chinese and Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts.

15:30 *Translating the Dharma(s): Some Notes on the Translation of the Four Dharmas of Sgam po pa*  
Mag. Rolf Scheuermann

Sgam po pa Bsod nams rin chen (1079–1153) or Dwags po rin po che is traditionally regarded as the founding father of the four great and the eight minor Dwags po Bka' brgyud traditions. Additionally, he is also seen as the creator of their doctrinal system which has been coined as the synthesis of Bka' gdams and Mahāmudrā teachings (*bka' phyag zung 'brel*). The famous *Four Dharmas of Sgam po pa* (*Dwags po chos bzhi*) is considered to be its most concise presentation. This doctrine consists of no more than four short formulations which are nevertheless said to summarize the entire Buddhist path.

This paper will discuss difficulties in translating the four ambiguous formulations of the *Four Dharmas of Sgam po pa*. Apart from an analysis of the concerned grammatical and lexical phenomena, different variants and interpretations of the formulations will be explored in the light of existent Tibetan commentaries. Particular emphasis will be placed on the play of words involving the term *dharma*.

16:00 **Coffee Break**

CHAIR: AKIRA SAITO

16:30 *Chinese Whispers? Transferring - Translating - Transferring Translations of Buddhist Literature*  
Prof. Helmut Tauscher

This contribution will reflect in a general way on some problems of translation – from Sanskrit to other Buddhist source languages as well as from these to European languages – and textual transmission of Buddhist literature. These reflections will be illustrated by examples from the Laṅkāvatārasūtra, chap. 2. 204 and 205 (on *ekayāna*).

17:00 *Between Deciphering and Translating*  
Prof. Tom Tillemans

Ideally, translators of literature or philosophy only render a text into a target language after they first have deciphered and understood it very well (or even 'naturally') in the source language. And we typically demand that such translations should largely stand on their own as works of literature or philosophy. In the case of Buddhist texts, what people **have** called 'translation' is often closer to deciphering. Philology,

grammar, traditional lexicographical materials, input from the tradition, commentaries, language instruction, etc. are all no doubt necessary to *that* enterprise. But is genuinely literary translation even possible or desirable for many Buddhist texts? That depends in part on which text one is focused upon: narrative texts in the Kangyur like the *Karmaśataka* almost demand literary translation; a highly technical Tengyur text like the *Pramāṇasamuccaya* probably does not. More importantly, literary translation has vastly different evaluative criteria, for it is, to take up an idea of David Bellos, close to a form of *rewriting*. Key notions in deciphering, like 'faithfulness' and 'accuracy', need to be significantly rethought when it comes to translation, as do concepts of meaning and truth.

17:30 *When Textual Problems Become Translation Problems: Some Reflections on the Historical-Philological Study of Himalayan Buddhist Texts*  
Prof. Dorji Wangchuk

It is perhaps remarkable that most, if not all, scholars who are engaged in the field of “Buddhist Studies” frequently translate but would not call themselves “translators.” They are very much interested in theories and practices of translation but are not scholars of Translation Studies. And yet there seems to be an inherent affinity between translators, translation scholars, and those who theorize and practice “Buddhist textual scholarship,” which may be defined here as an academic discipline within the domain of the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), (a) whose ultimate goal is the investigation and explanation of the intellectual history (*Geistesgeschichte*) and intellectual culture (*Geisteskultur*) of a society impregnated with Buddhist religion and philosophy, (b) whose main research material consists of written texts (or written sources) transmitted through the medium of manuscripts, xylographs, epigraphs, modern books, and so on, and (c) whose methodology is defined by the employment of historical-philological tools and techniques, which presupposes a profound knowledge of the languages and cultures in which the pertinent texts have originated and through which they have been transmitted and disseminated. In this paper, I intend to share some of my thoughts regarding challenges faced when pursuing academic study of Himalayan Buddhism, particularly when textual problems inevitably become translation problems.

18:00 Discussion