

## PERSPECTIVES OF BUDDHIST TRANSLATIONS

*Lama Doboomb Tulku*

*Oh, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas dwelling in the ten directions, I entreat your attention to the deceased one namely Prof. A.K. Narain.*

*Driven by karmic power, the deceased one may be already born or to be born in any of the six realms. May all the forces of virtuous deeds, done by this deceased one from the beginning less samsara, such as giving, observing the moral rules and meditating samadhi and other immeasurable root virtues making others to do the same and appreciating such deeds done by others, follow the deceased one.*

*Also, may the forces of the meritorious deeds done by the surviving relations – such as making offerings to gurus and precious ones, servicing the sangha, donating to poor people, chanting mantras, reciting scriptures, bestowing initiations to the deceased one in mandala, performing other methods of purifying non virtuous acts – follow the deceased one and having followed, may the deceased one be freed from suffering of any of the six realms and attain the fully enlightened state of Buddhahood. (Repeat 3 times up to here)*

*Until the deceased one has not attained such state, may the deceased one attain a rebirth with perfect human life characterized by good opportunity of taking Dharma path. May that birth possess seven good qualities of higher rebirth\*. May that rebirth also possess seven wealth of sublime qualities\*\*. May the deceased be never, in all the future rebirths be deprived of seeing Buddha. May the deceased be never deprived of receiving teachings of sublime Dharma. May the deceased be never deprived of serving and honoring the sublime sangha.*

\* The seven good qualities of a higher rebirth are long life, health, good physic, wealth, respected family, power, knowledge.

\*\*The seven wealth of sublime qualities are devotion, morality, learning, generosity, conscience sense of shame, good behavior and wisdom

This short prayer found in Lama Tsongkhapa's miscellaneous section of writings was selected and translated by Lama Doboomb Tulku with the hope of benefiting Buddhist minded people at the time of passing away of their loved ones. This kind of translation can be called liberal translation.

It would be appropriate to bring to prospective the history of translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Tibetan into English. This can be done in three phases. A fourth phase should now be projected.

The first phase covers the early years of the colonial period on the Indian subcontinent, when Christianity and Christian values were an integral part of the colonial mentality. During this time the translations of Buddhist texts into English from Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan were often done by persons who were deeply committed to and influenced by Christianity. These translations contain a very high degree of Christian colouring in the language of the translations and in the interpretation of the original material.

Kern's early translation of Saddharmapundarīka, the Lotus Sutra, is a best example of this period. In it the phrase "the flesh pots of Egypt", which is taken straight from the Bible, is used to indicate the idea of sensual corruption. Even more damning to the translation is Kern's insistence on using "death" for Nirvāṇa. It betrays an unconscious devaluation, of the highest goal in Buddhism.

Other example of the overwhelming influence of biblical values upon an early translator is Rhys David whose translations of Buddhist texts are from Pali sources. She found an affirmation of the existence of the Soul in the teaching of the Buddhist!

Waddell can also be classified in this group. While he was in Tibet, Waddell is believed to have been quite favourable towards Buddhism; but at the time of writing his book in England, the prevailing Christian attitude towards non-Christian, especially non-biblical religions, changed his views and he produced a book that conformed to the then prevailing attitude.

In the second phase of translation of Buddhist texts, which may be taken to cover roughly the first half of the last century, the Christian influence is not as dominant. During this period, although the colonial, political and economic domination of many Buddhist lands in Asia continued, the influence of Christianity and Christian values on western translators faded into the background. In this phase the categories and concepts of traditional western philosophy became dominant and most translators were powerfully influenced by Kant. However, the introduction of Kantian categories and concepts into the translation and interpretation of Buddhist texts did not help to reveal the real object and purpose of these texts.

An example of a translator who worked extensively on Buddhist materials during this period and whose translations are deeply influenced by Kantian ideas is Stcherbatsky. His repeated use of the phrase "the thing in itself" comes directly from Kantian metaphysics. He uses it to refer to, as it does in Kantian metaphysics, the absolute or ultimate reality. However, whether it is a helpful phrase for understanding the Buddhist conceptions of Paramartha or Tathata is very doubtful. It may be mentioned that Kant was also influenced in his translations of Yogacara texts like the Madhyantavibhanga by another western philosopher, Berkeley, who was the first among western philosophers to propose the existence of only mind. This association was not helpful, for Berkeley was a bishop who wanted to prove that nothing could exist except in the mind of God, and therefore God had to be accepted as the supreme architect of the world. Most contemporary scholars now recognize that Buddhist mentalist philosophers, particularly Asanga and Vasubandhu, have a very different outlook from that of the traditional western idealism.

Another example of a western translator who, despite producing a great deal of very useful work, allowed Kantian ideas to creep into his translation and interpretations of Buddhist texts is Conze. His insistence upon the use of the term "the absolute" to translate Paramartha is again a direct imposition of Kantian terms and concepts upon Buddhist thought. It may be pointed out that Stcherbatsky, although a Russian was educated in Germany and it could be surmised that he was conditioned to abandon Christian values and replace them with those of Kant and Marx. Conze too belonged to that period.

The third phase of translation of Buddhist texts into English from Sanskrit and Tibetan sources is marked by the introduction of more models and conceptual schemes taken from the western intellectual and philosophical tradition. This phase prevailed roughly few decades in the middle of the twentieth century as is evident from the translations of some western scholars in which Kant and Marx, as well as Berkeley, are largely abandoned.

The new fashion has been to look to western psychology, as taught primarily by Freud and Jung, for conceptual schemes to be used in the translation and interpretation of Buddhist materials. There has also been a new tendency to adopt the concepts of linguistic relativism, particularly as propounded by Wittgenstein, for help in the work of translating Buddhist texts into English. There are many modern translators who, in their translations of Buddhist texts, have made large-scale use of concepts and terms taken from modern Western psychology and linguistic relativism. The most obvious example of these new influences in the translation of Buddhist texts into English is the works of Guenther; but there are many others who also fall into this category.

What these three phases have in common is the imposition of the Western conceptual scheme upon Buddhist material. It would not be wrong to say that all the translators working in these three periods have looked at the Buddhist texts through some Western spectacles of one colour or another. The results have inevitably caused some distortion to the original genuine Buddhist content

to a greater or lesser extent.

The problem is not only a Western one. A similar problem arose when Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese from Sanskrit. There Taoist, and to a lesser extent Confusion concepts influenced the translation and interpretation of Buddhist materials, and in some cases seriously distorted the meaning. \*Perhaps the problem of reading and translating Buddhist texts through one's own particular culture or intellectual spectacles is bound to occur, when Buddhist texts and techniques are introduced into a civilization which already has quite a well-developed and well-defined intellectual, religious or philosophical culture of its own\*

The remarkable accuracy of the Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit is due to the fact that these works are the products of joint efforts of Indian Acharyas and Tibetan translators. Moreover, the Tibetan translators were able to read, understand, translate and interpret Buddhist texts through spectacles which were not already colored by their own indigenous intellectual preconceptions.

There is now an emerging tendency among a new breed of western translators to work in close collaboration with authoritative Tibetan scholars belonging to the indigenous tradition and to allow Buddhist texts to speak in English but with an authentic Buddhist voice. Sometimes such attempts lead to overtly literal English translations which become difficult for the average English reader who are not familiar with the original language to understand. Still this is a positive development, for such relative difficulty in comprehension is preferable to wrong comprehension.

The goal for which we should all strive is of course a translation which conveys the whole sense and meaning of the original text to the reader. This basically means that the purpose and nature of the translation needs to be clearly identified. This can best be done by dividing it into two: 1) strictly an academic one, and 2) nonacademic. In the case of the former, it is utmost important that not a single word of the original text is lost in the process of translating it into the target language. Here the translator must keep in mind that the original text may also had gone through a translation from another language e.g. Sanskrit. In such cases, it is of great help if the translator has a fairly good knowledge of vocabulary and general sense of Sanskrit or for that matter any other language. In the second case, since the purpose is to convey the intended essential message of the text to the reader, the result of the translation should be as if the author of the original text is living today and he would have written in such a language and style comprehensible to the average educated reader of today. This style of translation can be called liberal translation. Here, one can also go a step ahead and say that universally accepted words of Sanskrit and in certain cases, words from other languages should be added and used liberally.

As far back in 1990, the writer of this article initiated an International Seminar on "Buddhist Translations: Problems and Perspectives" and despite not being a professional translator, got involved in some significant projects and continues to take interest in this subject.

Following are few inspiring verses translated from Tibetan into English by Lama Doboomb Tulku during his semi-retreat stay in an Indian village, which can hopefully serve as examples of liberal translation.

### THREE SHORT PRAYERS

#### A) OFFERING OF PRACTICE

*Sphere filled with the ocean of learning, flowers of spiritual attainment, incense of pure morality, lamp of wisdom, scented pool of devotion, nourishing substance of meditation with suppleness, soothing musical sounds of praise, and moreover, my body as a mansion, adorned with parasols, victorious symbols and banners of compassion, of intelligence and of confidence; I offer to you,*

*who always reside in my heart of widely opened lotus, I pray to the dharma lord, with firm devotion, may you, the guru of the world, the Dharma lord, be pleased all the time.*

#### B) LAM-RIM PRAYER\*

*1) Merit and wisdom as vast as the sky I have obtained here, with constant effort over a long time; may I become the guiding light of all, the Buddha, for the sake of all those whose intelligent eyes are blinded by ignorance.*

*2) Until then, in all the future lives, may I be compassionately guided by the Lord Manjughosha; and may I find a path to enlightenment, a complete system; and may I gain the pleasure of all the Buddhas by following it properly.*

*3) The path to enlightenment as I have found, may I, driven by force of strong compassion paired with skill, dispel the darkness in the minds of people; and may I hold the Buddha's teaching for a long time to come.*

*4) Where ever the precious teaching has not reached, or having reached, has deteriorated; moved by strong compassion, may I clearly show the source of benefit and happiness.*

*5) The Lam-rim system of teaching has come into being from the accomplishment par excellence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; may it lend affluence to the minds of people and continue the acts of the Buddha forever.*

*6) Human and non-human beings who helped me in the practice of the Dharma path by providing conducive situations and removing obstacles; may they never be strayed away from the path acclaimed by the Buddha.*

*7) When I endeavor ten dharma conducts\*\* to follow the supreme vehicle, may those with strength be helpful; and may the ocean of auspiciousness prevail all directions.*

\*Lam-rim means system of Path

\*\*Ten dharma conducts are scribing scripture, making offering, giving alms, learning dharma, reading scripture, memorizing dharma text, teaching dharma, reciting scripture, contemplating on the meaning of texts and meditation.

#### D) DEDICATION OF ESSENCE OF TEACHING

*1) It is by the grace of the guru, that I came across the teachings of the all-surpassing teacher, the Buddha. May all the beings be guided by the sublime guru. To that I dedicate this merit.*

*2) May the teaching of the benevolent one, the Buddha, be never shaken by the wind of wrong notions, and may there be abounding people, who having realized the mode of teaching, have gained faith in the teacher.*

*3) May I never be loose in upholding the system of the Buddha elucidating the truth of interrelatedly existing, even at the risk of my deprivation of body and life.*

*4) May I spend days and nights contemplating on the methods of promoting the way, found by the supreme guide with immense hardship in his past lives.*

*5) When I strive in the cause of Buddha Dharma with pure motivation, may the Bhrama, the Indra, the Lokapalas and the Black Lord and other protectors be always supportive.*