

Conference on  
**TRANSLATING THE WORDS OF BUDDHA**  
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**Current State of Translators' World - The Need of the Hour**

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Anything that has a noble intent is also difficult. Translation is one such activity which comes from the translator's desire to bring into the new language, texts or writings of import and significance. But can two languages convey the same idea just as well?

Faced with this challenge, the translator attempts many ways of retaining the original intent. Some undertake a literal translation endangering the meaning. Some go for meaning, but there again lies a catch. Does the translator know enough to uncover the layers of meanings held in the Sanskrit or Pali texts? To translate involves the step of understanding and rewording in the new language. Is the translator fully equipped to do this?

On the basis of the above questions, translations from Buddhist texts, both Sanskrit/Pali, and Tibetan can be put into four categories. The categories are directly related to the environment from which the translators came and the period in which they undertook the exercise.

The first phase is the period of colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent. At this time most of the translators were either missionaries or else those deeply committed to Christianity. While it is creditable that they undertook to translate from other religions, it was inevitable that they brought with them their understanding of Christianity into Buddhism. Kern's early translation of the Lotus Sutra, *Saddharmapundarīka*, is one of the best or worst examples of this period. He, for example translated the idea of sensual corruption as "the flesh pots of Egypt"; taken out straight from the Bible. Further he went on to unconsciously defeat the core teaching of Buddhism by equating nirvana with death.

Another example is of Rhys David's translations taken from Pali sources. She found, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, an affirmation of the existence of the Soul in the teaching of the Buddha!

Some writers, even though may not have prolific translators, brought words into use which reflected their poor understanding of the subject. For example,

Waddell's term Lamaism is full of Christian prejudice against Buddhism. Waddell had lived in Tibet and understood Buddhism to a great extent, but back in his Christian environs, he succumbed to prejudiced writing conforming to the then prevailing attitude.

In the second phase of translation of Buddhist texts, the influence shifted from Christianity as the major one to that of Marxism. This is approximately the first 50 years of this century. Most translators in this period 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. Stcherbatsky for instance, repeatedly used the phrase "the thing in itself"...a direct reflection of Kantian metaphysics. He uses it to refer to the absolute or ultimate reality. However, whether it is a helpful phrase for understanding the Buddhist conceptions of *paramārtha* or *tathatā* is very doubtful. Another western philosopher, Berkely, who was the first among western philosophers to propose the existence of only mind, 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.

The third phase can be said to run roughly from the middle of the twentieth century to the present, as is evident from the translations of some western scholars. The new fashion was 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 translation 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.

The common thread thus is that the translator's background greatly influences the translation, whether it means taking terms and ideas from Christianity, Western philosophy or school of thought.

The result has inevitably caused some distortion, to a greater or lesser extent of the original genuine Buddhist message.

One must add this problem is not only pertaining to translations made from the original into English. Similar problems were noted when translations were made into Chinese. The Taoist, and to a lesser extent Confucian concepts influenced the translation and interpretation of Buddhist materials, and in some cases seriously distorted the meaning.

How then were Buddhist texts translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan? Perhaps the remarkable accuracy of the Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit is due in part to the fact that in the eighth or ninth centuries C.E. Tibet hardly had any well-developed or well-defined intellectual tradition of its own. That is to say, the Buddhist concepts and values embodied in the Buddhist texts were introduced into what was virtually an intellectual vacuum. To put it more positively, the Tibetan translators were able to read, translate and interpret Buddhist texts through spectacles which were not already coloured by their own intellectual preconceptions.

The current trend is more encouraging. Today translators are either sitting with Tibetan scholars or they are themselves well versed in Tibetan literary sources to ensure that the right meaning is carried through. Sometimes such attempts lead to overtly literal English translations which become difficult, if not impossible, for the average English reader 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. This is what I have called the fourth phase, which I feel is done with a new spirit of objectivity and respect for the indigenous Tibetan Buddhist tradition, both literary and oral, and its legitimate representatives.

I fully agree with the statement by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche in his letter to the participants of this conference that enforcing a directive of any kind with regard to the Translation of the Words of the Buddha would not be possible, as the days of the great, all-powerful Dharma Kings and Patrons are long gone. However, I am also clearly aware that Rinpoche's basic concern is the survival of the pure Buddha Dharma in the modern world. We know that the key word for achieving the goal of this conference is working together. Therefore, allow me to state that I have cherished a long-felt idea that there is a need of modern day Sgrasbyor-bam-po-gnyis-pa. This unique conference is a perfect occasion to initiate such a project. I don't see any reason why a consensus about methodology of compiling such monumental work can not be reached. That will be a real milestone in the journey of translations of Buddhist works.