



*Participants at the Translating the Words of the Buddha conference held at Deer Park Institute in Bir, India.*

# Charting the Future of Buddhist Translation

More than fifty of the world’s leading Tibetan–English translators, Buddhist scholars, and lamas met in Bir, India, to work out a plan for translating the Tibetan Buddhist canon. **Peter Aronson** reports on the conference and how it promises to shape the future of dharma translation in the West.

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I was just about to get up from the breakfast table and introduce myself to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche when Robert Thurman bounded up and intercepted him. Thurman was talking enthusiastically about some project, but I couldn’t catch the details.

We were at Deer Park Institute, a dharma center belonging to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche in the quiet Tibetan settlement of Bir in India’s Himalayan foothills. It was March, and more than fifty prominent translators, scholars, and lamas had gathered for a five-day conference on “Translating the Words of the Buddha.”

Thurman later told me what he’d been saying: Now that he’s semi-retired from his post as chair of Buddhist studies at Columbia University, he plans to devote the coming years to

MATTHEU RICARD



(Above) Deer Park Institute  
 (Right) Conference chair Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche  
 (Far Right) Conference organizer and host Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche giving his keynote address



translating into English the 100,000-stanza *Perfection of Wisdom* sutra. Most of us have read the *Heart Sutra*, which is a concise summary, but have never seen the full version.

As anglophone Tibetan Buddhists, we hear so much about what the Buddha taught, but often don't get to read the teachings themselves. Why? One reason is that Tibetans, unlike those in most other Buddhist nations, tend not to emphasize the sutras. They prefer to rely on summaries, commentaries, and treatises by the great Indian teachers and Tibetan lineage lamas. The more important reason, though, is that the sutras remain largely untranslated into English.

The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, chair of the conference and founder and director of Nalandabodhi, said that without those sutras, the migration of Buddhism to the West is incomplete.

"We're trying to establish a Western Buddhism lineage," he said. "But without the original words of the Buddha, how can

we claim to be a Western Buddhist order?" He was referring primarily to the collection of texts known in Tibetan as the *Kangyur*—more than 500 sutras and (in most editions) 1,100 tantras, most of which were translated from Sanskrit.

"We can have lots of lamas teaching, and Zen roshis and Theravadin monks, but these are all secondary," he said.

The conference was organized by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and sponsored by his foundation. Dzongsar Khyentse—also known as filmmaker Khyentse Norbu, director of *The Cup* and *Travellers and Magicians*—is a lama from Bhutan who was recognized at age seven as the incarnation of Jamyang Khyentse Wangmo, a founder of the Rimé school of Tibetan Buddhism.



Translators continue their discussions over lunch.

The most ambitious aim of the conference was to lay the groundwork for translating the entire Kangyur. “When I learned that Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche wanted to translate the Kangyur into English, I was very encouraged,” Dzongsar Khyentse said in his opening remarks, adding, “It’s a massive task.” He stressed that although “it’s not the sole purpose of this conference,” it is a critical need that can no longer be ignored.

Translating the Kangyur is a feat that even the most optimistic observers estimate would take a dedicated team twenty-five years, with many saying it would take at least twice that—if not longer. But Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche emphasized the urgency of starting right away. “Those in the Tibetan community who are still able to understand and communicate in classical Tibetan are rare,” he said. “In about a hundred years there will be almost no Tibetans who can read the words of the Kangyur and understand their meaning, and very soon it will be too late to do anything about it.”

So these leaders in the field of Tibetan Buddhist translation met to hash out how to accomplish the task of translating the complete collection. In the end, they would draft ambitious plans for the next five, twenty-five, and one hundred years that go beyond even the translation of the Kangyur.

*E. Gene Smith, founder of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center in New York.*



First, though, the group spent a lot of time tackling nitty-gritty questions that translators have been wrestling with for years. One key issue was how much of the Buddhist terminology should be translated into English, and how much can be left in the original language. In one heated discussion, the translators debated whether they’d be short-changing anglophones by leaving in too many foreign words, particularly from Sanskrit.

When the Tibetans imported the sutras, tantras, and philosophical treatises from India, they left hardly any Sanskrit words untranslated. Pema Wangyal Rinpoche, a Nyingma lama who lives in France, said English translators should emulate that example. “We have to really find the right word in our target language,” he said. “We must not keep Sanskrit!”

He would like to see English equivalents for all Tibetan and Sanskrit words used, such as *samsara*, *bodhichitta*, and perhaps even *buddha* and *dharma*. Wulstan Fletcher of the Padmakara Translation Group, which is supervised by Pema Wangyal Rinpoche, countered, “I think the genius of the English language is its ability to absorb new words,” including ones with foreign roots, like microphone and video. And does it really take any less time, he wondered, to explain the meaning of “cyclic existence” than it does to explain *samsara*? Plus the *Oxford English Dictionary* already has entries for “*samsara*” and several other Buddhist words of Sanskrit origin.

Thurman pleaded for names, at least, to be left in Sanskrit. He said he feared that the translation for some names could sound a bit too cutesy in English, such as “Bodhisattva Little-Flower-in-the-Field.”

How about adopting Tibetan terms, rather than Sanskrit? Is the Sanskrit *vajra* any better than its Tibetan equivalent, *dorje*? Some said it might be the case because English and Sanskrit have a common ancestry (English is an Indo-European language). That’s why it’s fairly easy for English-speakers to pronounce *karma*, for instance. But Tibetan requires different skills that involve lots of training of the ear and mouth.

Another sticky point: since most of the sutras were originally translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit, would the group translate from the original Sanskrit or from Tibetan, and end up with a translation of a translation? A complication is that there no longer is a Sanskrit canon as such. Many of the original Sanskrit texts were lost, while others have been edited or

(TOP) JOHN SOLOMON; (LEFT) PETER ARONSON

# TRANSLATING the WORDS of the BUDDHA

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changed over the years, and some were even reconstructed based on the Tibetan translations.

Still, there are some Sanskrit texts available. Will those be translated directly from the original? I put the question to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche.

“Ideally, we should go from the original texts, in this case either Pali or Sanskrit,” he said. “But how many Sanskrit-speaking Buddhists are there who are really well-versed not only in the Sanskrit or Pali languages, but also in practicing?” He added, “There’s a sense of urgency, because the infrastructure is waning—the lamas, geshe, and khenpos who can understand some of these texts are disappearing just like Sanskrit. So practically speaking, it will have to be from Tibetan, I think.”

In asking how many Sanskrit translators are practitioners, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche touched on a controversial

subject: Do translators of Buddhism really need to be practitioners? Do they even need to be Buddhists? Isn’t it enough to simply know the language? He raised the question in his opening remarks: “Who does the best job, the scholar–translator or the practitioner–translator?”

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— Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

“There’s been a lot of discussion at this conference about whether a translator needs to be a practitioner,” said Thomas Yarnall from Columbia University, and the American Institute of Buddhist Studies, “and I think that question is not well-founded. We can’t devise a

test to know whether someone’s a good dharma practitioner; there’s no bodhichitta litmus test.” He sees critical-thinking ability and a familiarity with the philosophy, psychology, and culture of India and Tibet as the key criteria.

Most people I spoke with, though, said they felt that, at the very least, the translator’s motivation—in particular, the wish



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*Jakob Leschly of Siddhartha's Intent and the Khyentse Foundation responds to a question during a press conference. To the right are Wulstan Fletcher of the Padmakara Translation Group, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, and Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche.*

to benefit others—was an essential factor. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's opinion was typical of those I heard: "Whatever they're doing, whether they're translating one word, one *shloka* (verse), one page, every time they hold a pen or are about to press a computer key, it's important that they start by thinking, 'May this help all sentient beings.' I think that will always lead us to something good."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, speaking to the translators a couple of days later, also drove home the point that the translator's motivation is key.

The idea of working on a project of such massive importance for Buddhism in the West created a buzz among those attending, and an unprecedented enthusiasm for collaboration.

Most of the brainstorming happened outside the main conference hall. Excited to meet like-minded translation enthusiasts, the men and women exchanged ideas and email addresses over Indian *chai* and apple strudel.

And then there were the translation jokes. After Catherine Dalton of the Rangjung Yeshe Institute introduced herself to me, a man sitting across the table added, "And I'm Christian Wedemeyer of *rangjung namshe*."

I stared blankly.

"*Rangjung yeshe* means 'spontaneously arisen wisdom,'" explained a smiling Wedemeyer, who was actually from the University of Chicago Divinity School. "*Rangjung namshe* means 'spontaneously arisen ordinary awareness.'"

Right. Well... If only I could speak Tibetan, I'm sure I would have laughed. Clearly I was out of my element.

"Once you start making jokes in Tibetan, you know you've really gone over to the dark side," Dalton teased.

The atmosphere at the conference was quite collegial, even chummy. The translators' work environment hasn't always been so social, though. Theirs has historically been a solitary, isolated pursuit.

Jeffrey Hopkins, unable to attend because of health problems, sent a video letter. "I'm tremendously enthused by the very fact of the weeklong seminar of translators," he said in the message. "It's a great move forward, as so many of us have worked individually. Such seminars and conferences are ways for us to get together and learn, exchange terms, methods, and find out what other people are doing."

There's a general perception that translators don't like to work with each other. How do I know this? Because translators at the conference told me so again and again. One thing that may have contributed to some mutual ill will is not giving credit to those who had created earlier versions of translations. The group acknowledged the problem, and had decided before playing Hopkins' video that credit should be given to everyone who'd worked on a text, as Tibetans do. Hopkins underscored the point in his message, saying, "I'm asking the younger people gathered there in Bir not to do this to me. Don't view your work as replacing what I have done, but adding onto it." And the kicker got a laugh out of the crowd: "In other words, treat me the way I have *not* treated others."



*Closing prayers at the end of the five-day conference.*

Another question that proved contentious was whether they should come up with a standard glossary of English terminology for this project. Most translators develop their own terms over time, and some of those who've been around longest have their own unique, extensive vocabulary. Without consensus on word choice, though, confused readers would find a single Tibetan term—*yeshe*, for example—rendered in different ways in the Kangyur: as “wisdom” in one volume and as “exalted awareness” in the next, depending on who translated that section.

Some felt they should be able to use their own terminology, while others contended that the need for uniformity—out of consideration for the reader—outweighed translators’ individual preferences. The consensus seemed to be that a standard set of terms would apply for the Kangyur project. However, the group acknowledged that it had no control over what happened outside the scope of this project. E. Gene Smith, the scholar who founded the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC), jokingly lamented that there were no dictator kings to enforce the use of official terminology.

*Matthieu Ricard of Shechen Monastery and Marcia Binder Schmidt of Rangjung Yeshe Publications.*



PETER ARONSON

When the buddhadharma came to Tibet, the Tibetan translators had to walk for months to get a single text. These days, thanks to the efforts of people such as Smith, Ven. Matthieu Ricard, and many others, a vast array of Tibetan-language texts collected from libraries and monasteries far and wide are available online. The more computer-savvy among the group overflowed with ideas about how to best collaborate online using databases, and perhaps their own social networking site.

One of the ideas that got people excited was a proposed master list of texts to be translated, and a database for translators to post lists of texts they’re working on or have already translated, in order to prevent the frustrating duplication of work that happens because someone is translating a text without knowing that another translator is working on the same thing.

“I can think of two examples where that’s happened, involving someone here,” said translator Michelle Martin of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center and Shambhala Publications. She recalled asking a translator what they were working on, then later talking to another translator who had started working on the same text. “I said, Wait a minute! And this was just by bumping into people randomly. It’s years of work that gets duplicated when you could be doing something new and more beneficial.”

Although most of the participants translate into English, they hope to create a framework that will help people translating into any language. If an English-speaking translator contacts a lama to clarify specific points about a volume of the Kangyur, for example, a recording of that conversation would be posted in the database. Then someone translating into Polish, Portuguese, or any other language could listen to it, rather than duplicating the Q&A work.

It would be nothing short of a revolution.

“We translators tend to be kind of hermits, you know?” said Martin. “You have to be, in order to sit alone with a text and figure it out. If we can have this virtual community together where we can interconnect and share what we have, it’ll be really helpful.”

Technology is also making it easier for translators to access texts. “I’ve spent weeks and weeks looking for texts, but these days I can download them in minutes from the TBRC website,” Martin said. A tech enthusiast, she led the discussions about online collaboration.

Elizabeth Napper, co-director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, noted that it’s not just about accessing online tools and texts; it’s also about conversation forums. “You can go back and forth with people about your questions—you don’t actually have to leave America or France and come to India or Nepal to ask your questions.”

Many of the ideas about how to collaborate and support each other had their genesis last September when 130 translators met in Boulder, Colorado, at a conference organized by the Light of Berotsana Translation Group. There, the idea of forming an international translators’ guild arose, with senior translators acting as mentors for apprentices.

Historically, the Tibetan translators who trekked over the mountains to India worked in tandem with a Sanskrit scholar from India. In the same way, the translators in Bir appealed to the lamas present to provide Tibetan experts to help them. Ultimately, they hoped, a Tibetan partner would be available for anyone who signed on to do translation.



Professor Robert Thurman, president of Tibet House U.S.

This has been a very exciting, historic conference. I’ve been doing this for thirty, thirty-five years, and you can really feel that this is a turning point.

—Thomas Yarnall

With two days remaining before the close of the conference, one major issue seemed to be tugging the project away from the singular goal of translating the Kangyur: some scholars (at Columbia University, for example) have already been working on its companion, the *Tengyur*. It contains more than 4,000 treatises and commentaries by Indian and Tibetan masters on philosophy, science, medicine, and other topics. Together, the Kangyur and Tengyur form the complete Tibetan Buddhist canon.

Perhaps the best-known elements of the Tengyur are the commentaries written by the seventeen great Indian sages of Nalanda University, among them the masters known as the Six Ornaments—Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Dignaga, Dharmakirti, Asanga, and Vasubandhu. The work of these sages is so important to Tibetan Buddhism that the Dalai Lama often has said that Tibetan Buddhism *is* the Nalanda tradition.

In the end, the translators opted to bring those working on the Tengyur into the project’s fold, under the interim name “The Buddhist Literary Heritage Project.” They adopted a resolution laying out its goals:

**ONE-HUNDRED-YEAR VISION:** Translate and make universally accessible the Buddhist literary heritage. [By not using the word “Tibetan,” the translators wanted to convey the aim of eventually including Buddhist texts from other traditions and languages, too.]

**TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR GOAL:** To translate and make accessible all of the Kangyur and many volumes of the Tengyur and Tibetan commentaries.

**FIVE-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.

Eventually, they’d like to publish both the Kangyur and Tengyur under one umbrella, with the texts available as a bound set similar to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and in a searchable electronic format. And though they’d like to receive credit for their work, they don’t want to publish the words of the Buddha and other great masters under a restrictive copyright. Rather, they’ll probably publish the translations under what’s known as a Creative Commons license, which will allow anybody to use the work in the future, as long as they credit the people who did the original work.

The translators elected Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche as interim leader of the newly formed group. A preliminary version of the group’s resolution included the language: “We resolve that interim director Khyentse Rinpoche will be empowered to select, in consultation with project participants, the leaders and members of the working committees.”

Thurman chided his colleagues for wording that made



The Dalai Lama (standing in the center) poses with conference participants after meeting with them.

him uncomfortable, saying, “We’re not really in a position to *empower* him.”

No sooner were those words out of his mouth than a tremendous thunderclap rocked the building. There was a flash, and the lights went out. The translators broke into applause and laughter. When the crowd settled down, they changed the wording to, “We *humbly request* Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche to select...”

**T**oward the end of the conference, the question arose: Where to begin?

The participants opted for the Kangyur, but when the Dalai Lama granted them an audience, they decided to ask him to suggest a Kangyur text for them to start with. His recommendation:

“Concentrate on the Tengyur.”

The Kangyur, His Holiness said, is “something like a root text. But for study, for example with the *Prajnaparamita* (Perfection of Wisdom), I think the Tengyur is better.” Reflecting the traditional Tibetan view, he added, “Without being able to rely on these commentaries, we can get confused if we simply read the Kangyur.”

Unfortunately for the group, this advice came after the conference had formally ended, and the goals and resolution had already been adopted. Chatting with a couple of participants afterward, it seemed that, in light of the Dalai Lama’s advice, there was some confusion about how to proceed.

The conference, though, was not viewed as an end, but a beginning. What is certain is that over the course of the

conference, solidarity of purpose helped the translators slowly but surely coalesce into a team—one that, through its sheer size, may be able to tackle translation projects that were previously impossible.

Thomas Yarnall, usually rather understated, practically gushed with excitement. “This conference has been very remarkable—a very exciting, historic conference,” he said. “I’ve been doing this for thirty, thirty-five years, and you can really feel that this is a turning point. This is it.”

That word, “historic”—I wondered about that. The conference had been billed as “a historic gathering of translators,” but will it really go down in history as a turning point? That’s a bold claim. Will future historians of Buddhism look back at this meeting and compare it to the efforts of Tibet’s great dharma patron, King Trisong Detsen, to bring the buddhadharma to his country from India?

“Of course it’s historic in its determination and purpose and, I think, the quality of the people... the quality of the motivation,” Matthieu Ricard said. “I think I will probably realize *how* historic it is in five years,” when its impact can be better assessed.

An enthusiastic Elizabeth Napper summed up the mood: “The beauty of it is finding a way for people to work together. It’s a hugely optimistic vision, but I think the potential is just tremendous.” **BD**



People wishing to support the project and translators wishing to participate may contact the Khyentse Foundation by email at [info@khyentsefoundation.org](mailto:info@khyentsefoundation.org) or visit [www.khyentsefoundation.org](http://www.khyentsefoundation.org).