



## **Advice from the Tradition**

### **October 22-24, 2013**

### **Bodh Gaya**

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#### **Day One: Advice from Professor Sempa Dorji**

*(Speech in Tibetan, Translated into English)*

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Kyabje Rinpoches led by Khyentse Rinpoche, Reverend sangha, scholars and translators from different countries. Since Khyentse Rinpoche has asked me to do, today, I am pretending to say something I am almost incompetent to say, just to avoid disobeying the instruction. I am very happy to be here and meet you all and offer some service. So I offer my heartfelt gratitude to Khyentse Rinpoche and all of you. I also offer my Tashi Delek to everyone who has come from different directions and corners. What should I say in here now? Samdhong Rinpoche has already made most of the comments regarding the subject of this conference. I have nothing more to say.

I have nothing sweet to say. My comments are like a saying in Tibetan, “A heart-like friend points a finger at your forehead.” Similarly, “A loving person does not speak sweet words.” So, I have only bad things to say. I am sorry for this.

#### ***Translating the Kangyur and Tengyur is Challenging but Not Impossible***

Excuse me! Sorry! Let me tell you a joke. I met Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche in Delhi. He spoke to me about the Kangyur and Tengyur translation project in detail. Then he asked me what I thought about it. Now this is a joke as well as a straightforward answer. I told him the intention to translate Kangyur and Tengyur was slightly overconfident. Smiling, Rinpoche asked me why. I told him there are many challenges ahead of this project. I told him, “It is fine if we have the ability to overcome all the difficulties, but considering the time we are living in and the level of professionalism modern scholars have, don’t you think it is a bit challenging? However, it is not impossible. Nothing is impossible if we put effort. It will probably be good.” I said many such casual things to Rinpoche. Anyway, let us forget about that. This is how the situation is. There is one reason for saying this and that is what I have just explained.

#### ***Clarifying Numbers and Terms Referring to the Buddha’s Teachings***

First, in our context, the source text for translation is Kangyur and Tengyur, particularly Kangyur. If I comment on the main subject of Kangyur and Tengyur, the basis of our translation, Kangyur has been presented as “84000.”

“84000” refers to the 84,000 bodies of teachings that the Buddha taught as antidotes for the 84,000 different disturbing emotions. That is explained in the *Abhidharma-kośa*. All the sūtras say that there are 84,000 corpses of teachings, so 84,000 is the antidote for 84000 disturbing emotions. However, I wonder if we can identify 84,000 bodies of teachings one by one if we need to. There may be a few which we can identify. Most are remote to us. Sometimes, I wonder if there is anybody on this earth who could objectively identify each body of the 84,000 teachings contained in the Kangyur and Tengyur. Obviously, omniscient beings can identify them. However, it would be difficult to find a person among ordinary beings who can really identify 84,000 teachings in the Kangyur and Tengyur individually. So I think 84000 is merely based on name. By chance, if there is somebody who could identify them, it would be good to explain it here.

Other interesting terms are “the three baskets of Buddha’s words” and the “twelve branches of teachings.” If necessary, it is possible to identify the names of the “twelve branches of teachings” one by one, such as “Poetic Pronouncement...” in the Kangyur and Tengyur we have. However, when we place Kangyur and Tengyur in the hands of a scholar and ask him to identify how many volumes of texts belong to each branch, he faces a tough time. It is possible to find it though. The easiest is the “three baskets.” Since the teachings are divided into Sūtra, Vinaya, and Abhidharma baskets, it is a little easy to identify them. This is one thing I wanted to mention regarding the Pitakas and the source texts for translation.

### ***Researching on Source Texts***

The second point I want to mention regarding the source text for translation is, let us take *The Sūtra of Fortunate Aeon* (mdo sde bskal dzang) as an example. In the sūtras like the *Sūtra of Fortunate Aeon*, there are names of 1,002 buddhas. These names are said thrice, but they are not repeated once, twice, and thrice. There is no numerical progression. There are no names in the second and third stance. Since there are different names, the number also varies.

What did I do then? Since I had to write answers for some questions, when I had leisure time, I did some kind of research on it for a few days. When I read the text from top to bottom, it did not work – the 1,002 names did not match exactly. I tried to match all the names, but they did not. Feeling unsatisfied, I searched in the Kangyur and Tengyur texts I had. The names and sequence of 1,002 buddhas are almost similar in the versions. I did not get the Coné version. That might have had a different reading. Otherwise, all other versions have somewhat similar readings. When I researched and pondered over how the names were compiled, I found out that the first section of the names of the buddhas had been translated by one *lotsawa*, the second by the another, and the third by another *lotsawa*. These names had been arranged here and there while compiling the different translations. These are not something that has been finalized and arranged in order. So we can cite many such examples.

Therefore, if we have to believe 100% in what has been presented in the text, I do not know if it exists in the presence of future buddhas, but it does not seem to exist in the court of the past buddhas. There is nothing I can do. Most of my works end in a similar manner. This is problematic, but I could not do anything to solve this problem. I have encountered similar problems in many other cases. Concerning the source texts for translation, if the sūtra itself or the writings of scholars have been edited and revised

and if they perfectly match with the original text, then we need to finalize them as our source text. On the contrary, if we translate the text before finalizing it, there is a danger that our translation will be inconsistent and disorganized like the source texts. So, whether the source text is sūtra, tantra, or śāstra, whether it is big or small, if we revise and finalize it prior to translating, I believe our translation would be organized and efficient.

The texts Tibetan *lotsawas* have translated from Indian languages into Tibetan contain colophon or a translator's note. Although it is called Pāli today, in the olden days, it was the language of Magadha, the central land. Many texts have also been translated into the Magadha language. Some texts existed in Avabramsha, Zurchak language. There are also many *dohas* that have been translated into local languages. Among these, the majority of the texts existed in Sanskrit and Pali. These two became prominent cultural languages in Buddhist India. *Dohas* are meditative experiences spontaneously written down by mahasiddhas and realized beings. These writings neither have proper spelling nor uniform verses. Even the lines are not of the same meter, they are of various kinds. So if we examine and know the position of all these different source texts before they are translated, not only would we have standard translations, but also the Tibetan texts would be edited as to what percentage has been translated from the original Sanskrit version. The thoroughly revised text will become a reliable and valid source text for our translation.

### ***Scribal and Editing Errors in Source Texts***

Most of the Kangyur and Tengyur texts, our source texts, were not translated and written by the *lotsawas* themselves. They were written by the scribes (secretaries). The master copies for print blocks were also written by the scribes. When these texts written by the scribes were engraved on wooden blocks, all the sun- and moon-like *lotsawas* had already passed on to the other realms. Now, who edited the print blocks? The scribes only knew how to write, but did not know editing. Since the print blocks were engraved from unedited master copies, a valley full of errors is left in the texts. Then they would invite people who are learned in Buddhist teachings and philosophy to edit those texts. These scholars can remove the errors to a certain extent, but cannot thoroughly edit the texts like the *lotsawas*. These scholars lacked the knowledge of philosophy, Sanskrit grammar, experience, meaning and history that the early *lotsawas* possessed. Those people edited the texts through assumptions. So the editions lacked the quality of editions done by the *lotsawas* themselves.

Let me give a couple of examples. First is the star “*rgyal*” in our astrology texts. These days, the *rgyal* star has become popular like wind. However, the star *rgyal* does not exist in our solar system. There is no *rgyal* in Chinese astrology. The star *rgyal* does not exist in the translated (Sanskrit) astrology texts. It has been translated as *pusch-she nakchatra*. *Pusch* means *rgyas*, not *rgyal*. People have mistaken syllable *sa* for *la*. One letter has been distorted. This mistake had probably been made by the scribe, not by the translator. Once the mistaken word got written in all astrology texts, all the texts have *rgyal*. Although it is a mistaken word, we cannot do anything. There are many other similar words. If ignorance creeps in while talking about the essential points of things, a small word can cause a great disaster.

I would like to explain a couple of more reasons. We recite the confession prayer for downfalls every day. We chant one line as “I prostrate to Buddha Palgye” (*dpal rgyas*), but it’s actually Pagye (*dpa’ rgyas*). In the Sanskrit text, it’s Veer Dutta, not Shri Dutt. There is a Sanskrit text of this prayer in the sūtra. In there, it is Pagye. So the syllables ’a and la have gotten mixed up. There are many such mistaken translations of Sanskrit words. The scribes made these mistakes and the mistaken words were engraved on the print blocks. Once engraved on the print blocks they became popular and everybody takes it as the flawless version, and it remained for many years. I cannot say anything much as everybody recites this text. What can I say on this already popular text? However, the translation will be faulty if we use an erroneous source text. The offspring of a faulty father will be faulty.

If we make these mistakes and do not correct them, later, when these texts get to a learned scholar, we will not have convincing reasons other than, “My teacher said it like this. It is in the old texts, in the Kangyur and Tengyur.” Other than this, the translation will not serve any purpose. As Gendun Chopel said, “Ancient history does not help much.” It would not help. There are many such texts. So the source text, be it Kangyur or Tengyur, must be verified and finalized through thorough revision. Whether the verification is one hundred percent reliable or not, I think it should be presumably reliable, at the very least. Since many learned Eastern and Western scholars are gathered here, it is 100% possible to have fully verified source texts on this very seat.

Therefore, you must consult the Sanskrit texts and see how the original texts are. If either the reference text or the Sanskrit version is not available, there are other related texts to refer to. As Kyabje Samdhong Rinpoche explained in the morning, it was not readily easy to take out the word *mchog* of *dkon mchog*. However, it could be taken out from the *Uttaratantra*. We could take out *mchog* by relying on the words in the *Uttaratantra*. We can take out the word based on the commentary and the meaning. There are texts in which we can interpret the meaning and take out words. There are commentaries and texts. So we can apply the means to take out words by interpreting the meaning. It is not impossible. It is 100% possible. It is not just one person or two people. Since the wisdom of many Eastern and Western scholars have gathered here, it is perfectly possible. However, whether or not you accomplish the task depends on your effort, your persistence and the one-pointedness of your intelligence. So I request you all to take care in finalizing the source text.

### ***Basic Principles of Tibetan Translations***

This is all regarding the source texts for translation. Concerning the translation, how much should we translate? One thing is I do not know English and Chinese. I only see a few texts translated from Pāli and Sanskrit, just as a lamp being lit in a room. So I would like to say a few things from this perspective.

#### ***1. Literal Translation***

There are a few basics principles that Tibetan translators followed while translating texts. First is literal translation. In this translation, the word in the source language has three aspects: *designation*, *verbal root*, and *declension*. There are also *associated translations* of the scholars. With a clear

knowledge of these four aspects, translators need to thoroughly examine the meaning of the declension and verbal root, the name and number of signs, what associated words to affix and what meaning these four aspects give when the associated word is affixed.

Literal translation is translating the words. If the words are translated correctly considering the four aspects, the words will not get lost or altered. When the Tibetan scholars translated, they have maintained the words. Earlier in the day, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche asked me what is meant by *lhung bzed*. Is it dropping or what? In our Tibetan language it is *lhung bzed*. In Sanskrit it is *bikshapatra*. If I elaborate on the meaning of *biksha* it would be too long. *Bik* has emerged from the verbal root *vaik*. The verbal root *vaiksha* is called *vaishpujari*. Another one is *bhaghan avashish*. There is meaning in terming *vaish* as *pujari*. *Pūjā* is offering and *pūjā* has the connotation of nurturing or nourishing the senses. So *vaish* means nurturing the senses. *Viksha* is alms. *Pata Avdhani* has the meaning of dropping.

*Viksha, jatmale, patramale. Pathmale* means dropping and *tramale* is nurturing. It means receiving. It means holding what is being dropped without letting it fall on the ground. This is *vikshapatra*. So *pa* in *patra* can also be called *blug gzed*. It can be called either way, *lhung bzed* or *blug gzed*. When we translate the word literally, whether it's translated as *blug gzedorlhung bzed*, the meaning is the same. There is not much difference between these two words. *Tra* means receiving or protecting, not letting it fall on the ground. *Vikshapatra* is one hundred percent *lhung bzed*. There is no discrepancy whatsoever. The *lotsawa* translated the word keeping the meaning in mind and when it was shown to the *pandita*, the meaning was precisely correct. It carries the meaning of alms and receiving. That is how Tibetan *lotsawas* translated the words literally.

## 2. *Meaning Translation*

Second is meaning translation. If the word translated into such and such a word in the target language, the translation was submitted to a *pandita* to check if the meaning of the word was precise. The *lotsawa* would tell the *pandita* he had translated a certain word into such and such target language and ask him to check if the word had the exact meaning. I have a few things to explain regarding getting to the precise meaning, but it is not necessary at the moment.

For example, father is *pita* in Sanskrit. It is *pita mani putra* and *puti namatra*. The passage through which water comes is *puti nama*. It is *betakli, trar mani tar, putar*. If one liberates, he is known as *putar*. Thus, water, *betakli* becomes the liberator. Why is it called the liberator? In the Indian culture, when the father dies, the son makes an offering with water. *Tar pen* in Sanskrit is “water offering”. Thus, the Sanskrit meaning of son is *putar*. This kind of understanding is called cultural understanding. I do not know if such a meaning can be precisely transmitted in English. If such a meaning is there in English, it would be very strange. We can have ‘father’ if the meaning is there. If we keep it as ‘father’, from a distance we will have some kind of reference to point our fingers at, but the cultural meaning is not there. There are many hundreds of similar Dharma words. Most of these words have a cultural meaning. So, in order to be able to get the cultural meaning in the target language, the biggest responsibility for us translators is to examine how much strength the words in other languages produce and to find means to draw the strength of the words.

### 3. *Translation, Transcription, Transpronunciation*

Next, when we translate the texts, there are three or four different types of translations – transpronunciation, transcription, and translation. Some scholars translate through understanding. They try to understand the text they are going to translate. I have heard that this kind of translation requires understanding the background or history of the text or document. As I mentioned earlier, one is translation, which is translating the meaning. The other is transcription, to translate the words. The third is transpronunciation. We must translate the pronunciation too. Tibetan translators have done all three different types of translation. Sūtras and śāstras are mainly translations. When we translate mantras we need to translate both words and pronunciation. Otherwise, it is difficult to get a precise translation of mantras.

The sound of mantras is not translated into native Tibetan sound or pronunciation. They are left in their own form. *Ta* and *tha* are left for *ta tha* in Sanskrit. Then letter *tra* is created by reversing syllable *ta*. In this manner, when the mantras are chanted or spoken, four *tras*, four or five reversed letters are added. Once number of letters are increased by adding four or five dense letters in the ten sets of letters, if the Sanskrit word is *dakini*, the letter is reversed form of *da*. Since the nature of Tibetan language is such that the sound of the letter affixed to the foot of mother letter is not visible, it is just *dra*, which is a reversed form of *da*. And that is transcription. Both sides have *da*. Likewise, the letter created according to the Sanskrit letter is pronounced as *dra* in Tibetan. Tibetan *tra* has been made. That is transcription. The pronunciation is the same in both languages. If Sanskrit has *tra*, *thra*, or *dra*, Tibetan too has the same letters and sound. Letters *pa*, *pha*, *ba*, and *ma* were also made in a similar manner.

When we say the mantra *sambhara*, *sambhara*, it is both transcription and transpronunciation. It is *om amogha shila samvara*. Here it is written *sambhara*. It is not *sambhara*, it is *samvara*. There are many cases where we write *ba* in place of *wa* and *wa* in place of *ba*. At the moment, you might not be aware of such errors in the mantras. Since mantra is a very risky thing, we must not make mistakes. Even for one single mistake we must be very careful. There is a reason for that, which I need not explain now.

Then the transpronunciation should be accurate. *Om amogha shila – amogha* is *don yod*; *shila* is *tshul khrim*s; *samvara* is *sdom pa yang dag pa* or *yang dag par sdom pa*. *Vara vara* is “may I refrain”. That is transpronunciation. So if we do not use all the tools, it is difficult to translate the meaning of mantras precisely. In our case, the letters are Roman and the language English. So, when we translate the texts into English we might need to give a style to both words and pronunciation. Then the meaning also should be verified and made accurate. So I expect our translators in India to be able to translate texts according to the standard or procedure just as the translators in Tibet had done. It is not an impossible task. In fact, all the activities of the bodhisattvas are possible activities.

#### ***Not to Lose the Meaning in Translation***

Concerning translation, that is how translations are done. As explained just now, in order to translate the text, we must have a cultural understanding of terms and an understanding of the pronunciation of phrases or sentences. We must also ascertain the meaning of words without getting the

pronunciation mixed up. We must in fact ascertain the meaning of the characters, words, and speech. Having ascertained all these factors, if any word or meaning in Sanskrit does not match with the word in Tibetan, we must research and find out who has made the mistake. Either the Tibetan or Sanskrit scribe must have made the mistakes. That is called *gong chok tsham zhag*. Who is going to do the work – the scholar or *pandita*? In the case of Tibetan scholars, once the versions were compared, a *pandita* would do the review work. *Panditas* were already very well trained in the treatises. In fact, those *panditas* edited and corrected the treatises themselves. Most of the *panditas* edited the treatises with their discernment and intelligence. Once *panditas* with great ability, such as Nagi Rinchen, Smritijnana were given the task, even if they made mistakes, they would not appear in the texts, because they could edit the texts others had written. We can have a well edited text if we have a *pandita* who has the ability to edit texts, because they have a clear knowledge of the meaning of words and terms.

So the text which has been edited by means of *gong zhog*, a commentary and those understandings which can ascertain the meaning to make the text authentic. When the texts edited in this way are translated into English, in the beginning, the translation would not appear smooth. It would be rigid and rough. The texts that Tibetan *lotsawas* translated from Sanskrit and Chinese into Tibetan are slightly rough. They are not smooth like those composed in native Tibetan language. For example, *The Songs of Realization of Milarepa* is soft and smooth, since the words and pronunciation are based on the Tibetan culture. Similarly, when we read the poem composed by a scholar himself, the flow is smooth as well as sweet in our ears. The poems translated from Indian languages are more or less rough. They are not so sweet in our ears.

The reason why they are rough is because the translators have tried not to lose the meaning of words, the meaning and the elegance of poetry in Sanskrit. If the poems were translated and written in native Tibetan language, it is difficult to have the *lotsawa's* translation procedure, the culture and the cultural meaning that exists in the Indian text. So they are kept as it is. Therefore, when translating, verses are considered. Let us take *bshes spring*, *Suhrlekha* as an example. The syntax of *bshes spring* is *arya*. The correct form of *Arya* syntax (in Sanskrit literature) is uneven – with 20, 12 or 9 syllables. When translated into Tibetan, this makes the syntax uneasy and makes it difficult for the meaning to be carried over. Therefore, in translation it is important to give priority to the meaning over the syntax or literary considerations.

Likewise, if we consider *namdrel*, I think it is a slight overconfidence. *Namdrel* is what is known as *anush trug*. *Anush trug* is poetic composition. *Anush trug* is an eight lettered verse. In the Indian text, not all the eight lettered verses have been translated into eight letters. In Tibetan it is seven lettered. Seven between the dots. All have been translated into seven lettered verses. A seven lettered verse is not *anush trug*. It does not have the meaning of mantra. Seven lettered verse is not called *anush trug*. It's called *zhonu rolpa*. It is a different thing, a different composition. Sometimes, composition is translated. In this respect, a learned scholar told Sakya Pandita that his translation was corrupted and the verses were mixed up and down. By doing that, both the sequence of words and composition would get mixed up. Would it qualify to be *namdrel*? Sakya Pandita said it would because here the subject of the word is important, not the composition or spelling. Once Tibetan procedure is followed we must make the composition a seven lettered verse. We should not keep them as eight lettered. Having done it like this, there are instances

where compositions have to be moved up and down while translating texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan. The same situation might be possible while translating texts from Sanskrit and Tibetan into English. Nevertheless, it is important not to lose the meaning. In the command of the king on translation in *sgra sbyor bam gnyis pa*, it is said that at the very least, we must not lose the meaning of neutral word. So we must not lose the meaning.

Why must not we lose the meaning? Bhagavan Buddha's words, his *bashan* (language) is neither Pāli nor English. None of these are Buddha's *bashan*. Where is it said that none of these are the Buddha's language? It is not something I have made up. In the *Immaculate Light*, the great commentary on *Kālacakra* by Rigden Padma Karpo, it is said that Bhagavan Buddha has no *bashan*. Since his enlightenment until *mahāparinirvāṇa*, he has not spoken a word. Then, what is it? Buddha has speech. His speech is within the individual beings to be tamed. Individual beings understanding the teachings of Buddha precisely in their own language is Buddha's speech. In Pāli it's called *sikanyupira*. Buddha's speech is how beings understand in their own language. For example, Buddha said "This is the noble truth of suffering". Kodinaya understood in his own language and gods and nagas understood in their own respective languages. Otherwise, Buddha's language was not god's language or Sanskrit. It is said Buddha did not have his own language. Just as it is said, "I teach in all the languages of the six classes of beings", Buddha teaches in the languages of all sentient beings. He does not have *basha* of his own.

Henceforth, if it is the Kangyur, it is a different thing. Since, all the words of the Buddha (bka') have been born from Buddha's supreme wisdom and aspiration, the speech that can illuminate the meaning of Buddha's words spoken to different individual beings without fault is no different than the Buddha's speech. It is not faulty, it is precise. In the great commentary on *Kalachakra* I have just mentioned, it is said that Tripiṭaka [exists in the language of individual beings]:

Indian *Ka* has been translated into Indian language.

Tibetan *Ka* has been translated into Tibetan language.

Tibetan language is also exactly the same as the speech of Buddha. Nothing much has changed. So Tibetan language is also Buddha's speech. Similarly, Tibetan translators have good means and wisdom to edit (*sampadan*) the translations. If a verse from the sūtra is quoted in Tibetan, it is undoubtedly the speech of Buddha. It is unmistakably the words from sūtra, the words of the Buddha. However, if we quote the verse translated into English and other modern languages saying it is from the sūtra, it does not become the speech of Buddha. It is just randomly proclaimed as a verse from the sūtra. It is the speech of the translator, not the Buddha, because the words of the Buddha have not gotten there in an authentic form as it is. Buddha's words have emerged from the supreme wisdom while the translated quote is a product of discursive thought. We have only written down the reflection of our conceptual thought. The reflection of wisdom has not reached there. So quoting the translated verse saying "from the sūtra" does not qualify to be the authentic words of Buddha. It is a little difficult to believe in such a quote. However, if a verse is quoted in the Tibetan writing, it is exactly the words of the Buddha. Sorry, I have spoken slightly longer. If there are suggestions to make, I will speak later. I am stopping here for now. Thank you!