Advice from the Tradition
October 22-24, 2013
Bodh Gaya

Day One: Presentation by John Canti, 84000 Editorial Chair
(Speech in English, Translated into Tibetan)

The idea of this meeting is for us to find ways in which you, the scholars and Rinpoches, might be able to help us in this enormous project. First of all, I should say how sorry I am that I can't give this talk in proper Tibetan, so will I have to give it in English and ask Khenpo Sonam Tsewang to translate, at least briefly. I have some slides, which summarize some of the main points.

For us to be able to avail ourselves of your real help, I think it would be important for you to try to understand a little about how we organize our work—because we are not in eighth century Tibet, and the structure and organization of our translators' work is very different from the model that most Tibetan scholars will immediately imagine when considering canonical translation.

The Origins of 84000

As I am sure you know, this project really started in a big way after the discussions at the conference in Bir, in March 2009, during which the participants set some goals for the project. These goals were that within a hundred years, we would try to see the Buddhist literary heritage made universally accessible in modern languages.

Then, to cut that down a bit to a more manageable, intermediate goal, we decided that within 25 years, it should be possible to translate completely and make widely accessible the whole of the Kangyur and related volumes of the Tengyur. We also set ourselves a goal for the first five years (we are now in the fourth year) which was to translate and publish a representative sample of the Kangyur and the Tengyur and establish the infrastructure and resources necessary to accomplish the long-term vision.

Important Translation Goals of 84000

In planning the way the project could be achieved, we then had to think about what result we would like to see in a little more detail. There are a few aspects that we defined as important.

The first was to aim for translations that were both accurate and readable, targeted with educated readers in mind, but not necessarily specialist scholars—depending on the nature of the text, of course. The translations would not be academic studies with a lot of detailed research and a lot of opinions, and the notes and the rest of the apparatus that we usually see in academic translation would be kept relatively simple.

Then, we wanted to see, if possible, the complete Kangyur and the Tengyur collections kept together in one place, easily accessible from all over the world without costing anything to readers; and for the texts to be permanently available, or permanently as far as possible. We wanted to give the texts a fairly uniform quality and presentation; we also preferred the project not to be identified with any single tradition or group, and the translations to be widely recognized as authentic and reliable.

Questions about Translations

Having set these goals, what methods and what means would we need to achieve them? I will just very briefly mentioned the main topics.

First, of course, the **translations**. Where do we get them from? Do we use existing translations or make new ones? Where do we find **translators**? Who they are going to be? How many do we need? What **source texts** are we going to use? Which edition of the Kangyur? Are we going to use the Sanskrit or we going to use the Tibetan? How do we **publish and distribute** the translations? How do we **manage** the projects? What **tools and resources** do we need? How do we use **technology** to help us? How do we **finance** the whole project? And how do we manage the process of **editing and reviewing** the work?

Basically, we decided that the emphasis was going to be on making new translations of most the texts.

Questions about Translators

Then, we had to think about where we were going to find the translators. A quick calculation showed us that to translate the whole Kangyur in 25 years, we would need to have some 15-20 translation projects in progress all the time during those 25 years. And indeed at present[1], we have 22 teams involving 142 translators working on 35 projects, some of which involved multiple texts.

So where were we going to find all of these translators? How were we going to identify and get them working for the project?

First of all, what kind of translators were we looking for? We obviously needed people who are qualified, competent, and familiar with the genre of texts, with previous experience. We tended to favor teams of translators over individuals, and perhaps it is important to say here that most of the teams of translators include one Tibetan consultant, in most cases a Lama. Our way of recruiting translators was usually on the basis of a contract for the duration of a text project. We don't have any translators who are permanently part of the staff of the project.

We have had two main ways of engaging translators. One is by invitation. We find somebody who has a known expertise in a particular kind of text and we invite them to apply for grant. We also have open application procedures, where translators themselves decide to contact us and to apply for a grant. In both cases, we assess the proposal and look at it carefully, and our grants committee decides whether or not we should accept the proposal from those translators and give them a grant to do the work.

---

1 As of October 2013.

Questions about Source Texts

I will jump to our policy on the source texts, which gave rise to a lot of discussion. A lot of translation projects get very involved with the production of a critical edition of the text. They look at all of the available versions and try and decide which is the most authentic, which readings of different passages are most likely correct. It is a very important process in many cases for the study of the text. But we decided that if we were going to be able to fulfill our goals, and produce finished translations within the time frame, we would not ask our translators to engage in detailed textual research or to include a full critical edition in the translation. We would ask them to find a common-sense, middle way between completely uncritical acceptantance of a single version and the very time-intensive work of determining exactly what the original should be.

At this stage, especially for works in the Kangyur of which there is no Sanskrit version that has survived, we take the Tibetan translations as a valid basis in their own right for translation into English. In such cases, generally speaking, we take the version in the Degé edition as the starting point and if there are any significant differences in other recensions compared to the Degé text, we simply note those variants in footnotes.

Now, in a minority of Kangyur texts, perhaps in 10% or 15%, there is a Sanskrit version in a reliable edition. If the existing Sanskrit text is clearly one that is close to the Tibetan translation, then either we translate into English directly from the Sanskrit; or, if we do translate from the Tibetan text, we take account of the Sanskrit as closely as possible, consulting it during the translation. However, in some cases, the existing Sanskrit version is significantly different from the one that we can presume must have been used by the Tibetan translators. In those cases, we choose to follow either the Sanskrit, or the Tibetan, or we might even translate both separately and keep them separate. This is determined on a case-by-case basis according to the best option.

Questions about Publication of Translations

To jump to the final stage, what were we going to do with the translations when they were finished, and how are we going to publish them? Obviously, until very recently, to publish books would have been the obvious choice. Everyone knows how to use books and they are relatively long lasting. But there are some disadvantages. Books cost a lot to print, and distribution (internationally especially) is very difficult and costly. In the West, unlike in Asia, it's very difficult to distribute free books. There is no network for distributing free books and when you give people a book that is free, they think its propaganda or publicity.

So printing and distributing the texts as books would be a big difficulty, because books are costly and liable to consume a lot of the resources that we have to be so careful with. The content of a book is static; once it is printed, you can't change it, at least until it is reprinted. And if we publish a lot of short texts, we need to wait until we have a lot of those short texts to publish in one book, rather than publishing them as small booklets which don't seem to have much value.

Very early on we concluded that, in the initial phase, to publish all our translations on the internet would be the best primary medium. It allows readers all over the world to access the texts immediately and free of charge. It allows us to update and re-arrange the texts very easily. We can present each work in the context of the whole collection. Very importantly, we can have electronic glossaries, cross references, searches, links to the original Tibetan texts and many other metadata included in the publication; and we can produce PDFs and eBooks for use offline. Later on, however, we may well decide to print some books, too, especially for long-term archiving and for libraries.

84000's Editorial Guidelines and Standards

Finally, I should mention, at least briefly, that 84000 as a project has defined a set of guidelines and standards, which we send to all of the translators working for us. We ask them to produce translations according to those guidelines, of which you will have a copy in your folder. Although it has been updated several times, it evolves as we proceed. You will see that it includes all sorts of specifications for the final result, including the source text policy, the kind of readers that we are targeting, the approach, and the style, the terminology policy; how to deal with proper names; how to lay out the contents; and what annexes we would like to see in terms of introduction, glossary, notes and so on.