



Advice from the Tradition

October 22-24, 2013

Bodh Gaya

Day One: Presentation by Tom Tillemans, 84000 Editor in Chief

(Speech in English, Translated into Tibetan)

I am very happy and honoured to be able to talk to you in my position of editor in chief. I am also very glad to have the opportunity to have this type of exchange so that we can inform the Tibetan community a bit about our methods, our objectives, our goals, and the general atmosphere that we have in this organization.

Fortunately, John Canti has ably presented many of the details of the 84000 policies so that I don't have to go into these matters again. In the interest of time, I will remain on a more general level.

Adopting a Pragmatic Approach to Translation

The first thing that comes to mind when trying to describe a little bit as to how we work, is the word “pragmatism.” We probably began with a certain set of ideas or even ideology, and then we tested a number of them in the light of experience, finding that the situation was often a lot more complex than we had initially imagined. Some of the best minds in the East and in the West have thought about what is involved in translation. But I think the best way to describe translation is that it is more of an art than a science. We have in general tried to steer away from overly theoretical or ideological positions and put the emphasis on the practical. In other words, translational problems are not something that can be decided by a top-down type of procedure coming from a committee or an editor in chief. One has to look at the particular situation, the particular text, the particular needs, and the particular problems.

General Concerns in Translation

In that context, I think there are three sets of problems, three general concerns that come up in translation:

1. There is of course the question of **terminology**, the question of equivalences between one language, between the source language and the target language.
2. There are also the difficulties that come from **syntax**, in other words, from deciphering the grammar of a particular sentence.
3. Finally, last but not least, there are **stylistic matters**. These stylistic matters are often extremely important and are extremely difficult to present in a completely general rule minded way. In other words here, especially when it turns to style, the art of translation becomes really quite dominant.

1. *Terminology*

Translation is not just a matter of mapping one word in the source language with one word in target language. That said, the choice of terminology is extremely important. What we have done, in practical terms, is that we have not decided to impose in advance a type of *Mahāvvyutpatti* or a kind of *sgra-sbyor bam-po gnyis-pa* in English. We largely let the translators - who are often very educated people with strong ideas -- put forth their own ideas as to how the term should be translated. We initiated this discussion, hoping for a type of convergence to emerge, but we haven't done this in a top-down manner. The reason that we haven't done so is partly the simple fact that it would be too difficult to impose such types of solutions, and that many of the issues are too hard to settle in advance. But also there is a great danger that if one spends too much time on preliminary matters of deciding what your *Mahāvvyutpatti* is supposed to be, then you will never get around to the actual work of translation.

2. *Syntax*

Let us turn to the second sort of problem that typically arises in translation, which is what I am calling 'syntax', the grammatical considerations. Here, I think that what we have seen is the importance of not just understanding the Tibetan, but also understanding and having a knowledge of the basic underlying Sanskrit structure. In other words, I think one of the things we have learned with a bit of experience is that we cannot, in many cases, simply translate the Tibetan text in abstraction from the Sanskrit. That means that even if the Sanskrit original doesn't exist, we have to, in many cases, be able to imagine what a possible Sanskrit reading could have been.

Something we also stress is that we need to be accountable for what we are translating. It has to be possible for a reader to check if our translations are good or not. When we are working with Tibetan texts, the Dergé edition is of course widely available. That is not a problem. However, in cases when we are working with Sanskrit manuscripts which aren't widely available, we have at times had to publish an edition of the text. There are new Sanskrit manuscripts which are being discovered; fortunately there are still quite a number of Sanskrit manuscripts in China for example. And there are Sanskrit manuscripts in Nepalese libraries, Indian libraries and so forth. We found that in many cases, we also have to publish an edition of Sanskrit that is being translated, if our translation is to be checkable. This has especially been the case with Tantric texts where the manuscripts may be unedited and in inaccessible locations. We don't, generally speaking, intend to replace existing academic work on critical editions. But, in some cases, it has been necessary for us to do these editions ourselves.

3. *Stylistic Issues*

Finally, in the three types of concerns and difficulties that are involved in translation, I talked about stylistic issues. Broadly speaking, this is what we could call the "literary aspect" of the text. In other words, we have texts which of course have a literal meaning, but are also full of metaphors, imagery, and have a particular tone. Broadly speaking, this means looking at the texts not just as pure information, but as a literary product too.

Style poses a number of difficulties, and the Kangyur is, in that respect, very different from the Tengyur. The type of translation that you are going to do for, for example, the *Karmaśataka*, which has

a whole number of stories, a whole number of accounts, should have a literary aspect that is a completely different from the type of translation that you do for Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*, which is very dense, which is terse, which is condensed, which needs an auto-commentary to be understood, and where every word is of crucial importance. In other words, the literary liberties that you can take in the case of a text like the *Karmaśataka*, the *las brgya pa*, are much greater than what you would take in a text like *tshad ma rnam 'grel (Pramāṇavārttika)*. So the Kangyur and Tengyur are very different in this respect, i.e., in their literary aspects.

Paralleling Historical Situations of Translation

I'm going to make a certain parallel between our situation and historical situations of translation. I don't know if this is controversial, I don't intend it to be, but I think our situation resembles more the situation that faced the Chinese translators than that which faced the Tibetan translators.

Just to be very brief, in the case of Tibetans, you had two very important factors, which in a way aren't present in our situation, nor were they present in that facing the Chinese.

On one hand, you had a language which was being formed, that is, the Tibetan language. Its vocabulary was being constituted by translations and decisions about translation. Now, in the case of English, we didn't and we don't, generally speaking, form our language by inventing neologisms for translational purposes. We have an existing language, and we are trying to find equivalences in that existing language, one which already has a strong literary and philosophical tradition. In that respect, we are closer to the situation that faced the Chinese, who also already had a rich literature, a rich philosophy before translation of Buddhist texts. The typical Chinese intellectual asked questions which were similar to the type of questions that Westerners ask, which are: How does this fit into our existing language? How does this fit into our conceptual scheme? The Chinese of course had their period of "lucid conversation / 清談 (qing tan)" between Taoists, Confucianists, and Buddhists; we have them in a sense too. I don't know whether they are as lucid, but it is a similar process.

The second point is the way the Tibetans developed the so-called "reformed translational language," or *skad gсар bcad*. You had a political structure, a hierarchical structure, which was able to say, "This is how you are going to translate, this has been decreed." You had a king who could say, "This is how things will be." In the case of the Westerners, as in the case of the Chinese, we are a relatively unruly bunch with our own ideas and stubbornness. People have elaborate ways of defending and arguing for their own different positions about how to translate. Indeed, dealing with this individualism comes down to some of the things that I said before about having to recognize that there are different points of view about translation; it means too that one has to adopt a pragmatic approach and respect the existing types of points of view that people have.

I am going to conclude there and once again I thank you very much for having the patience to listen to my ideas. I hope that we have an interesting exchange on these matters. Thank you.