

## Role of Tibetan Translation of Buddhist Scriptures and Treatises: An Informative Study

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### I. Introduction

We all know that after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa, His teachings were formulated and transmitted through oral tradition, and it was written down in several versions in the 2nd and 1st century B.C. The entire corpus of Buddhist writings was translated into Chinese over a period of a thousand years, beginning in the 1st century C.E. This was a collaborative effort by Chinese monks in particular.

On the other hand, the His teachings were brought to Tibet in original since the introduction of Buddhism by the Indian Buddhist missionaries. The Tibetans have paid and still pay high regard to those teachings by preserving them in Tibetan translation and by codifying them as the sacred texts of the Indian. From the seventh century onwards, during the reign of the Tibetan king Thrisrong Deutsan, the original teachings began to be translated into Tibetan under the royal patronage. The work was done over a long period at the Translation Department known as The

Island of Translation/The Indian Island of Translation.

The translation of Buddhist Sanskrit Texts that include many teachings of the Buddha, commentaries and other exegetical works of Indian adepts was carried out in this department after the invention of Tibetan scripts by Thonmi Sambhota. The collection of the translated works preserved in the form of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur* is the outcome of this department.

### II. Editions of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur*—

The term *Kagyur* refers to the translated form of the original Buddhavacana, while *Tengyur* refers to the commentarial works on the Buddhavacana by Indian adepts from Nalanda, Vikramaśīla and others. The corpus of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur* preserved in Tibetan language by the Tibetans has several editions. Right now, ten different manuscripts of hand-written *Kagyur* are available: (1) four independent *Kagyur* Manuscripts—Newar, Tawang, Phugdrak, and Gandhola; (2) One Tshalpa *Kagyur* Manuscript in Berlin; (3) four Them-Pang-Ma *Kagyur* Manuscripts—Ulan Bator, London, Stok Palace and Tokyo; (4) and one translation of the Tibetan *Kagyur* in manuscript form, the Petersburg manuscript of the Mongolian *Kagyur*. Besides, there are eleven xylograph versions of the *Kagyur*. Regarding *Tengyur*, Bu-ston Rinchen Drub edited and prepared a complete set of *Tengyur* for printing in the year 1334. This great work was placed in the Zhalu

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Monastery, which was built in the 11th century in the vicinity of Zhigatse. It became the main seat of Bu-ston Rinpoche in the 14th century. It was the main centre of learning Zhalu philosophy. The catalogue of that collection of Tengyur was also written by Bu-ston Rinpoche. The title of that catalogue is “*bstan ’gyur gyi dkar chag yid bzhin dbang gi rgyal po’i threng ba*”. After Narthang Monastery, Zhalu Monastery became famous for a number of collections of Tibetan literary works, which include the works of Bu-ston Rinpoche himself. Later several other sets of Tengyur were also made and copied, which were mostly done on the basis of Zhalu Tengyur and Narthang Tengyur.

After the demise of the 5th Dalai Lama, Desi Sangye Gyatso invited scholars and expert calligraphers of Tibet at one place in Ü-tsang. As per his order, a complete set of the Tengyur was written in golden ink. It was then kept in the Potala Palace. Following it, in 1737, Tenpa Tshering, the king of Derge, sponsored scholars to xylograph the complete set of Tengyur. When the work was over, it was kept in the Publishing House of Derge. It was known as the Wooden-Block printed Derge Tengyur. In 1741, another xylograph of the complete set of Tengyur was made under the sponsorship of Sonam Tobgye of Pho Lhawa. It was placed in the Narthang Monastery and known as the xylographed Narthang Tengyur. Almost in the same year, many scholars from China, Mongolia and Tibet gathered in Peking

where they started translating the whole Tengyur into Mañju, the language of the sparsely populated people in the North-East region of China. In the middle of the 18th century, a chieftain from Cone xylographed a complete set of Tengyur. It is known as the Cone Tengyur. Its catalogue was prepared by Jigme Wangpo, the 2nd reincarnation of Jamyang Zhepa.

### III. Contents of Kagyur and Tengyur—

The corpus of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur* contains a total number of 333 volumes—*Kagyur* 108 volumes and *Tengyur* 208 volumes including the translation of almost 500 Tantra texts according to the catalogue of Peking Edition. The collection of Buddhist texts may grossly be divided into three sections: *śāstra*, *sūtra* and *tantra*.

Further, the present systematized Buddhist texts consisting of Buddhavacana, commentarial works and indigenous works are available in two forms— in original and in translation, and these are contained mainly in Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese. Among them, the Tibetan texts developed over specific periods, namely early period of Tibetan literature [upto 10th CE], middle period of dimensional diversity [cent.11th-18th CE], modern period of the works [period 1950] and contemporary works [1950 CE]. These period-distributions are based on thematic relevance in the time context. The contents of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur* are great

sources of understanding Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular.

**IV. Period of translating Sanskrit Buddhist Texts**— The seventh century in which Srongtsan Gampo reigned Tibet was the dawn of Buddhism. But actually Buddhism was introduced and strongly established in Tibet with the construction of Samye Monastery. That was done with the help of Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava during the reign of King Thrisrong Deutsan. During the very reign, 108 translators assembled there. Thereafter, they started translating the Sanskrit Buddhist Texts into Tibetan in the presence of Indian adepts, the subject experts.

The translation of this huge corpus of texts was completed under two periods viz., Early and Later Spreads of Buddhism in Tibet. The adoption of Buddhism resulted in a huge process of trans-cultural reception of a complex of cultural elements. In the wide range cultural elements adopted in this process the most relevant aspect is Buddhist literature. Translation of the Buddhist texts on a large scale did not commence before the second half of eighth century under the patronship of King Thrisrong Deutsan.

At the end of the 8th century, Emperor Thrisrong Deutsan invited Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava from India. Tibetans were ordained to the Order of the Buddhist Saṅgha for the first time. Later, during the reign of Lang Darma, Buddhism in Tibet faced the

worst time. Whatever the matter may be, Buddhism had almost eclipsed from Tibet. In the 10th century, Lha-Lama Yeshe Ö, the king of western Tibet invited Atisha Dīpaṅkara from India for the revival of Buddhism in Tibet. At that time the great translator Rinchen Zangpo translated many Buddhist texts, especially Tantra, and tirelessly worked for the revival of Buddhism in the Land of Snow.

**V. The Code of Translation**— Codification of translation was also done in Tibet in course of time. Many opine that the codification was passed during the reign of Emperor Thri-Ralpa-Chan. However, Chomdan Rigpe Raldri (11th Century A.D.) suggests about three codifications. The first one according to him was passed between Thumi Sambhota to Emperor Thrisrong Deutsan; the second one passed after Thrisrong Deutsan to Thri-Ralpa-Chan; and the third codification was passed during the time of Lha-Lama Yeshe Ö of western Tibet and great translator Rinchen Zangpo.

The decree of the emperor is documented in *Madhyavyūttapatti*, which suggests the dos and don'ts of the translation. The text also mentions that the Tibetan translation is extremely literal, maintaining the order of the word as it flows in the original text. However, in some cases few adjustments are also needed to follow the Tibetan syntax, which is the demand of the languages; thus it is particularly useful for scholars. An Editorial Board and a Central

Committee of Translators, consisting of both Indian paṇḍitas as subject experts and Tibetan translators as language experts, were constituted. The translators were instructed to submit their translations to the Board for authentication. They were authorized to revise old and new translations in order to maintain uniformity in terminology as well as translation methodology and techniques. This Board is generally referred to Society of the Buddha's Tradition (?). A major contribution to the standardization and codification of the translating methods and particularly the terminology employed to translate Buddhist terms are the Sanskrit-Tibetan lexicographical works entitled *Mahāvīyūtpatti* and *Madhyavyūtpatti*. These were composed during this period by the same central committee. These lexicographical works were intended to standardize and codify the Tibetan terminology used to translate the corpus of Sanskrit Buddhist texts. This process also involved revision of earlier translations and checking new translations by the Editorial Board of Translators, in order to maintain uniformity in terminology and translation methodology.

Of several catalogues and listings of translations that had been compiled at the time, one has been preserved as it was included in the Tibetan Buddhist canon. It is commonly called *ldan-dkar-ma* catalogue, named after a palace where much of the translation work was done. The list is attributed to Kawa Paltsek and

Namkha'i Nyingpo, the two translators who were active during the reign of King Thrisrong Deutsan and later during King Thri-Ralpa-Chan. So the first version of the catalogue can be dated to the second half of the eighth or the first quarter of the ninth century. Evidently, titles translated during the reign of Thrisrong Deutsan and Thri-Ralpa-Chan were added to it at a somewhat later date, but not after the middle of ninth century. The catalogue as we know now contains 736 titles, the majority of it being translations from Sanskrit. Some of the titles have been identified as translation from Chinese. Among these titles there is no mention of translation of grammatical texts.

These translations were superb and owe much to the later development of Tibetan literary works also. In fact, the emperor had laid a very strict rule for translation of Sanskrit Buddhist Texts into Tibetan. According to the decree, no one was allowed to translate according to his or her wish. No one was permitted to use a new equivalent word for Sanskrit unless the Editorial Board authorized it. If any centre of translation needed to create a new equivalent for a Sanskrit word, they were bound to present it to the Editorial Board and get their consent. Once the Editorial Board allowed the use of that word, it had to be added to the dictionary, so that the word could be used by all the centres of translation. It was also suggested that during the process of translation, certain other methods were undertaken. One of them was the method of leaving the Sanskrit term as it is

without translating into Tibetan. For e.g., *Padma, Utpal, Kumuda, Champaka, Chandan, Potala, Himalaya, Varanasi* and so on. It is suggested in the *Madhyavyūtpatti* that in order to avoid confusion for Tibetan readers who are not familiar with the Indian tropical flowers and plants, place and animal names, the name of the place (yul), animal (sems can), flower (me tog), plant tree (rtsi shing) etc., must be kept in Sanskrit original preceded by the word such as *yul, wA ra Na si, ri dvags ye Ne ya, me tog pad ma, shing nya gro dha* etc., respectively. Though the words *yul, ri dvags, shing* etc., do not exist in Sanskrit, these are added by Tibetan Lotsawas to lessen doubt in nouns that is not familiar to Tibetan students.

Moreover, with the anticipation of wrong interpretation that leads to the malpractice of Tantra, many *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs* have not been translated literally into Tibetan; rather they have been transliterated in Tibetan. These are recited through the standard Tibetan transliterated form of Sanskrit. Keeping in view the correct pronunciation of Sanskrit mantra, later Tibetan Sanskritists like Sakya Paṇḍita, Narthang Lotsawa and others have composed the standard manual of proper Sanskrit pronunciation.

Further, there are many cases where we find corrupted form of transliteration that has the root of Sanskrit origin which is mistakenly identified as the Tibetan original term and is used in day-to-day life. Therefore, translators and intellectuals who lack a proper

understanding of etymology of certain Sanskrit terms and Sanskrit grammar mistranslated the meaning in their own way.

Chomdan Rigpe Raldri and Losel Jangchub Yeshe had composed three types of catalogue of the Tibetan *Kagyur* and *Tengyur*— Extensive, Mediocre and Concise. The catalogues were placed in the Narthang Monastery. They were the first hand-written, complete copies of the *Kagyur* and *Tengyur*.<sup>1</sup> Later they were compiled and edited in appropriate manner by an eminent Tibetan scholar and translator in the 14th century. On this basis, several other copies of the same were published and made accessible to a large number of Tibetan people.

Apart from it, there are some other copies of the *Kagyur* printed by other publishers in foreign countries. But they are the photocopies of the Tibetan original. Today there are also computerized off-printing sets of the *Kagyur* available in monasteries and markets. Among all editions and photocopies, Narthang, Derge, Peking, Cone and Lhasa are believed to be the reliable sources.

**VI. Mode of Translation**— After the construction of Samye Monastery, scholars from India and China were invited and they were accommodated in the monastery. In their presence, Tibetans studied Sanskrit and started translating

<sup>1</sup> *National Seminar on Buddhist Studies (Proceeding)*, Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2018, p. 154

Buddhist texts into Tibetan. According to the *Madhyavyūtpatti*, Indian adepts and Tibetan translators adopted a very clear norm for translation. It says: In the presence of the emperor, Venerable Palgyi Yonten (Śrīguṇa) and Ting-Nge Dzin (Samādhi) along with other courtiers framed the norms and the means of translating the texts. The translation should be accurate and should use popular Tibetan words. When one translates texts containing Buddha Dharma into Tibetan, the flow of Sanskrit language should be maintained word by word, because that will be most accurate in terms of both the words and the meaning and so on. In this way, Tibetans maintained every possible way for maintaining the accuracy of translation in order to avoid misinterpretation of the texts. As a result of the hard work executed by the Indian and Tibetan scholars, the huge collection of Buddhavacana is available with us in the form of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur*.

**VII. Tradition of Translation—** There is no doubt that Thonmi Sambhota was the pioneer of the translation of Buddhist Sanskrit literature. After devising the Tibetan script on the basis of Nāgari and Bhardul, also written as Vartul, scripts, he translated twenty-one Sanskrit Buddhist Texts<sup>2</sup> into Tibetan. Some other sources say, he translated several other texts too. In the eighth century, after the

establishment of a Translation Department at Samye Monastery, translation of Buddhist Sanskrit texts was carried out there. More than 100 Indian paṇḍitas, a few Nepalese adepts and hundreds of Tibetan Lotsawas were engaged in this project. They translated more than five thousand texts, though all are not available in the present collection of *Kagyur* and *Tengyur*.

**VIII. Methodology—** Actually translations are of two types: written and oral. Regarding the former, it also has three principal divisions— literal, mixed and meaningful or translating the meaning only. In this concern, Tibetan Lotsawas preferred and specially put emphasis on literal translation in order to maintain the order of the word as it exists in the original text. However, in some cases a few adjustments have been made to follow the Tibetan syntax, which is the demand of the language. On the other hand, oral translation needs to be done in such a way that even common people can understand what is being said or conveyed. Another thing is that the translation that one makes should not be the final version. If we look at the history of translation of Buddhist texts into Tibetan, for example, it always says at the end, “This was translated by so-and-so, and then it was revised later by so-and-so, and then it was revised once again by so-and-so.” And so over the course of centuries, the translations were improved and corrected. So one should never be so arrogant to think that the translation he

<sup>2</sup> Lahuli, K. Angarupa. *Biography of Thonmi Sambhota*, Sarnath: Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 2000, p. 54

makes will be absolutely perfect and the final product to be used for centuries, in terms of Buddhist texts.

Another thing is that the original texts are very terse. They were written as a root text very often, which means that it acted as a source for many different commentaries to explain it differently. In one's study one would memorize this root text and try to keep in mind all the different levels of meaning that could be associated with the text. This means that many of the texts were read with many, many pronouns: "This is like that because of this and that." One should be careful with all these things. Thus, in terms of translation of Buddhist Sanskrit texts, Tibetans were great pioneers in translating – they did a magnificent job considering they had no dictionaries and no clear ways of learning Sanskrit when they came to India.

**IX. Need and Scope**— Regarding the need and scope of translating Buddhist texts, three main things may be taken into account— propagation, preservation and profession. Let us just imagine: had the Sanskrit Buddhist texts not been translated into Tibetan, could the Mahāyāna Buddhavacana be preserved till date? If the translated Buddhist texts were not preserved, how could Buddhism have been propagated in the world? How would the world have known the value and significance of Buddhadharma, particularly Mahāyāna Buddhadharma? Secondly, the credit of creating the opportunity of serving the present society

by translating the precious treasure of Sanskrit Buddhist texts goes to both the Indian paṇḍitas and Tibetan Lotsawas. It is due to their kindness that many people have become able to make their career in the field of translation, restoration and editing Sanskrit Buddhist literature. Apart from it, we know that a deep and thorough study of consciousness and quantum physics theory and several other things are being conducted by modern scientists all over the world. All these theories are particularly discussed in the translated Mahāyāna Buddhist literature.

**X. Significance**— In fact, the Tibetans have been regarding India as their Guruland since the beginning. And they have executed their responsibility in an incredible way as reliable disciples by translating and preserving India's heritage. Indeed, the precious corpus of literature and culture India lost in course of time has been preserved with great care by them. It is due to their enthusiastic efforts and incredible initiatives that the world has been able to study Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, and also know the importance of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In short, Tibet is the only country where for centuries ties were kept with India through a harmonious relationship, termed in the annals of history as a teacher-pupil (Guru-Śiṣya) relationship. Indian adepts crossed the impenetrable mighty Himalayas, sacrificing their lives on the invitation of the Tibetan spiritual kings. Similarly brilliant students were sent by the kings to India to study in the

unbearable heat of the Indian subcontinent. Despite these hardships of geography, customs and habits, cultural ties were maintained until around the seventeenth century when Buddhism got eclipsed in its birth place itself.

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