

*Translation for the Sake of Self and Other*

Let me start by saying that my remarks here concern literary, rather than oral, translation. When we think of translating a literary work, we tend to focus on, understandably, the end result—on how our labors, the production of a work in the target language fulfills the goals of others. But I want to reflect here on two other aspects of translation related to learning, having more to do with the *process* of translation than with the *result*. That is, with the act of translation rather than the end product, which is the translated text as an object to be publicly disseminated. I want to suggest that the very act of translation, not just the end result, but the act itself, is valuable—valuable for oneself and valuable as a pedagogical means, as a way of teaching and learning.

First, let's examine the topic of the way translation serves one's own goals. In Tibetan monastic academies, classical religious texts are read and often memorized. Sometimes, they are memorized *before* they are really, seriously read. Students then receive commentary on the work from a teacher, which is the transition from the mere *words* to the *meanings* of the texts. That meaning is then rehearsed when students summarize it in formal study sessions or in formal debate. The purpose of these latter steps is to engage the meaning of the text in a critical fashion, to fully understand the implications of what a text is saying, to raise doubts and to resolve them, to become conversant with the text at a very deep level. Through this painstaking process, one is forced to come to conclusions about what the text is saying and to come to decisions about whether or not what it is saying is true.

Whether through this process one earns the right to be a transmitter of the text is a more complex question, since, some sources would say, gaining the credentials as a transmitter of a text requires a deeper level of the internalization of a text, for example, through meditation. I'm here reminded of this as a discussion from the Bu-dön (*bu ston*) commentary on the *Abhisamayalankara* literature that defines what a treatise is and who is qualified to write a treatise:

...a treatise, a valid commentary has to have these three qualities: one, it has to be written by someone with an undistracted mind; two, it has to explain the meanings of the sutras; and three, it has to be consistent with the path of emancipation.

So the commentary has to have a soteriological dimension and it has to explain the words of the text, but also, the writer has to have the quality of having an undistracted mind. We can debate about what it means to have an undistracted mind, but, it seems to me, this implies that not just any old Joe-schmo, like me, with a distracted mind, is qualified to write a real commentary.

With this as a basis, Tibetans have developed a method of critical, textual scholarship that, even if not unique in the history of religions, is, nonetheless, amazing in its depth and scope.

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We Buddhologists also pride ourselves on being close, critical readers of text. And, it is true that the field of Buddhist Studies has made important contributions to the understanding of Buddhist literature. To name just one, Academic Buddhology has led to important advances in our understanding of the social, political, and economic contexts in which literary works were written and in which they were disseminated. This is no small thing.

But the type of critical analysis that takes place in the Tibetan monastic academy simply has no parallel in the Western academy. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that the structures of the Euro-American education system—the length of programs, structure of classes, and notions such as normative time to degree-completion simply do not permit anything like the in-depth study of text that is the hallmark of Tibetan scholarship. Granted, the doctoral dissertation provides an opportunity for students to achieve greater depth. But, this is usually only in regard to a single text, and, even then, where do graduate students go to gain this depth and expertise but to traditional scholars who have spent a lifetime studying these works?

One of my teachers, Geshe Sopa-la, who was both a traditionally trained scholar and a university professor, used to say that, in North American universities, we teach and learn Buddhism the way that a one-eyed yak eats grass—taking a little bit from here, taking a little bit from there, and a little bit from there. Two-eyed yaks, apparently, eat grass continuously, without leaving any gaps. He was making a point similar to the one that I'm making. That, we, academics, are jacks-of-all-trades and masters of few. We have superficial knowledge of a lot of things, but we don't have in-depth knowledge of many of them.

Okay, this wasn't meant as an indictment; so why this comparison between traditional Tibetan and Western academic methods of textual scholarship? I mention all of this because I think that there is one way in which we, academics, come close to gaining the kind of depth into a literary work that we find in the Tibetan tradition. It is translation.

Translators may not memorize the words of the texts that we translate, but we read them over and over again. We don't always go to experts for commentary, but many of us do. Or, at least we do to resolve the most difficult points that we encounter in texts. We may not publicly rehearse the meaning of the text the way the Tibetans do but, when we translate a work, we are forced to ask questions about what the text is saying, confronting questions of meaning again and again. Most importantly, perhaps, the process of translation, the act of having to render the text in a new language, in a new idiom, forces us to arrive at conclusions about what a text means. And, while, for many Western scholars, the act of rendering the text in the target language is the end of the process—we publish the translation and that is that—for other scholars, it's the beginning of other forms of inquiry. Some of these forms of inquiry are unknown to traditional scholarship. But, other forms of critical inquiry used by Euro-American scholars, most notably Philosophy, wrestle with normative issues, with questions about the truth of the claims being made in the text, which has obvious parallels to the form of inquiries found in debate. This is not to say, of course, that the act of translating a text is identical to traditional textual scholarship. Clearly, there are many differences. It is to say that, perhaps, translation is as close as we Buddhologists come to achieving the depths found in traditional modes of scholarship.

The process of translation is, I think, is a unique method of self-study, at least it has been for me. I know that the Tibetan word *rang don* (literally, "own purpose") often has a negative connotation, especially in the Mahayana context where it's equated with selfishness or self-concern and where it is contrasted with fulfilling the goals of others. But, I don't think we're

doomed to being *shravaka-* or *pratyeka-buddha* translators when we claim the translation can be not only for others, but also for ourselves.

I don't mean to imply that we shouldn't translate texts for the benefit of others. But, we miss something, it seems to me, when we ignore the role the translation plays in the translators' own self cultivation, in his or her own development as a student of Buddhism. When we translate, we are not simply reading a text. Rendering a work in another language forces us to make decisions—decisions about what the text means, about how we will render a particular word and, in many cases, about whether to be faithful to the words and phrasing of the text or to the idea that the author is trying to express. Without making such decisions, translation is impossible. The mere act of reading a work in a foreign language does not force these decisions upon us. But, the act of translation does. It makes us active decision makers. If I had to place the essence of translation somewhere, it would probably be in this act of having to make decisions.

In the colophon at the very end of many Tibetan translations of Indian texts, we often find a short, formulaic expression that explains that such and such a person “translated” and “established” this text. But, the term used for “establish,” (*rten la 'bab*) also means “to decide,” “to resolve,” or “to settle.” Hence, the expression found in the colophon can also be understood as, “such and such a person decided upon the various translation options and, having resolved which is best, settled on the one that you have before you.” A long gloss, I realize, but one that gets at the spirit of the term and, I think, gets at the spirit of translation as a decision-making process.

I don't mean to suggest, by this, that reading a text in a foreign language without translating it is, necessarily, a passive and uncritical process. So, simply reading a work in Tibetan is not necessarily uncritical. But, clearly, there is a greater level of engagement and, I would claim, a greater opportunity to learn, when we translate. It's a distinctive way of studying or learning...

Today, advanced courses in Sanskrit and Tibetan are composed, almost entirely, of graduate students. Using the same models that my own teachers used with me to teach Classical Tibetan and that, I'm sure that, many in this audience still use... students prepare for the class by preparing the text. They then take turns translating portions of the work in the class itself. I correct them or, sometimes, they correct me. At the end of the quarter, they submit their revised translations. After that, I send the students my own translation, which I've also been working on throughout the quarter so that they can compare their translation with my own. At the beginning of every academic year, I go over the digital resources, databases, dictionaries, and so forth that are now available. I also let students know what is expected of them, as regards their final translations, which must include not only the final translation of text, but also additional research that they must incorporate in the form of footnotes. For example, I require them to look up all canonical passages quoted by a Tibetan author, to find these passages in at least one edition of the canon, usually using Paul Hackett's AIBS digital search engine and to note any variance. This gets them thinking about philological issues. I also require them to determine the dates of any historical figures mentioned in the texts to get them used to working with the BDRC database.

As a rule, we translate only texts that have never been translated into a Western language. Luckily, we live in a time when there are still many, many such texts. Opting for un-translated work means, on the one hand, that students might, one day, be able to publish these translations or studies on these works. On the other hand, it means that students can't crib off of existing translations. I allow my students to choose the text about half of the time. They usually choose

works that they hope to do research on in a Master's thesis or Doctoral dissertation. The other half of the time, I choose texts so as to ensure that students are being exposed to a variety of genres of Tibetan literature. What I just outlined is, more or less, how the class runs.

Sometimes, we spend an entire quarter working on a single text. But, it is more common to work on longish passages from two or three different texts in a single quarter. It's rare that we have the luxury to read an entire text from beginning to end...The text reading class is one of the few opportunities that students have to really engage with Tibetan literature in a serious and careful fashion. Note that at the core of this model of teaching texts is translation. A translation is what students prepare and present orally in class. It is what they must produce at the end of the course. Over the course of the 10-week quarter, students are forced to go through the texts at least three times—once in order to prepare for the class, a second time in the class itself, and a third time to produce their final translations. Most of the work they do for the course, they do on their own. But, the most pedagogically important part is the class itself. Here, students have to present their translations and to defend them. If it isn't obvious how they arrived at their particular translation, they have to show how their reading is grammatically possible. When two different translations are possible, then there are discussions on which are more plausible. Students have to defend their choice of translation terminology. They have to demonstrate, usually through my prodding, that they have understood their particular passage in the context of the broader text. Then, they have to listen to me ramble on about the connections between the ideas found in this particular passage and other ideas found in the broader Indo-Tibetan literary corpus and, sometimes, in different historical periods. This commentary, of sorts, they often offer into their translation in the form of footnotes. The class represents an opportunity to engage the text dialogically, that is, in conversation with other voices—my voice, of course, but also the voices of other students.

It is not uncommon for debates to erupt on possible translations of a given passage or on what the text means. Those of you who work in translation groups may have a similar experience. While it's a far cry from what happens in *shedras* or in debate courtyards, this dialogical element is, nonetheless, a way of engaging the text critically, gaining greater depth of understanding. Many of the discussions that occur in these text translation classes also occur in the mind of the translator, when she works alone. But, in this case, they occur without being verbalized. They occur *sotto voce*. This is arguably the biggest difference between translating by oneself and translating in dialogue with others. Both fulfill one's own goals, but they are very different experiences.