

Shamarpa on Kangyur & Tengyur Translation



Tibetan texts on rows

Recently I was requested by some students to explain my point of view on the translation of the Kangyur and Tengyur into English and other western languages. As I explained my views, I was asked to share these on my website for the benefit of the entire community.

Question: Rinpoche, what is your point of view on the translation of the Kangyur and Tengyur into English?

Shamar Rinpoche: “More important, I think, than translating the Kangyur and Tengyur into English at this point in time, is their revival in the Sanskrit and Pali languages.

The Sanskrit and Pali canons are the root, They are also the source for the Tibetan canon. However, they gradually get forgotten and vanish - or have vanished to some extent already. When the Sanskrit texts of the Kangyur and

Tengyur were translated into Tibetan, a good portion of their particular flavour and depth got lost in the process. If we translate these texts into English now, more of the deep meaning is bound to get lost, and we might up with a superficial result.

We can picture it like this: it is like polishing the leaves of a tree, while the roots and trunk are left to decompose.

Question: Isn't there a similar danger of losing the meaning when translating the scriptures back into Sanskrit and Pali?

Shamar Rinpoche: For a group of competent scholars of Tibetan and Sanskrit, due to the close relationship of these two languages, the result will be quite correct. Obviously, it should be a group of panditas working together, not the endeavour of individuals.

The quality of the result such translation work can only be judged by Indian Sanskrit scholars. Nowadays there are a number of Western scholars who claim that the Tibetan translations were not as accurate as previously thought. However, I believe that Western scholars are culturally still too far removed to pass such judgements.

I believe it is an urgent task to translate Tibetan sutras and shastras back into Sanskrit and to put effort into finding more of the Sanskrit originals. Regarding the translations of scriptures into English and other Western languages, I recommend translating books that are meaningful and necessary for the study and daily practice of Buddhist practitioners, such as the Uma-Gyen (Tib: dbu-ma rgyan, Skt: Madhyamaka-alamkara, Engl: The Ornament of the Middle Way), the Tendrel-Chunyi-Do (Tib: rten cing 'brel bar 'byung ba dang po dang rnam par dbye ba bstan pa'i mdo; Skt: Pratityasamutpada-sutra; Engl: The Sutra of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination), the Salu Djangpe Do (Tib: sā lu'i ljang pa'i mdo, Skt: Śalistambasūtra, Engl: The Rice Seedling Sutra), and the like. These are texts that offer modern people support and tools for understanding their emotional problems, such as their anxiety or depression; and these texts help people to find peace in their mind and improve their ethics. Apart from such texts, I don't suggest translating the Kangyur and Tengyur as a whole.

Another concern is the preservation of the [classical] Tibetan language. If the whole canon were available in Western languages, most people would certainly consider the Tibetan language obsolete. The [classical] Tibetan language is a language that was created for the purpose of expressing and preserving the Buddha Dharma. It is not used for any other field or profession. Preserving the Tibetan canon also means preserving the [classical] Tibetan language.

According to my understanding of the historical developments, the original languages of the Buddha Dharma, that means mostly Sanskrit and Pali, lost their importance and influence by the 14th century because of the Muslim empire in India. They also suffered from the damaging influence of certain Hindu scholars, such as for example *Shanka Acarya* and his followers, who lived around the 9th century. While Shanka Acarya preached a philosophy that seemed to be a blend of Buddhism and Hinduism, he nevertheless attacked violently their representatives, calling both, Buddhist monks and Hindu yogis, *'the shaved-head and the long haired bloodsuckers that use religion for food and survival.'* His successors used Shanka Acarya fame to further denigrate Buddhism.

Another damaging influence for Buddhism in India dates back to *Dramze Gyeguk* (Tib: *bram ze bryad gug*; Skt: *Ashtavakra*, Eng: *The eightfold crooked hunchback*). He was a very sharp-minded clerk of lower middle caste who initiated a "revolution of clerks" against the higher castes. He declared: *"We are smarter than others as we know the language of the gods and have a literary education. We are smarter than the others. We are the real Brahmins."* He became a famous scholar, the author of the *Ashtavakra Gita* that is still cited even today. Ashtavakra and his followers were very skilled in clever word games and defeated many Buddhist scholars in debate. Consequently, the reputation of Buddhist philosophy as a whole suffered as well. One of the positive results of this development, however, was that Buddhist scholars, such as *Shakya Shri Bhadra* in the 13th century, had to seek refuge in Kashmir or Tibet where they spread the Dharma to a wide audience.

The final blow to Buddhist philosophy in India, came in the form of the destruction of the great universities such as Nalanda and Vikramalashila by the Muslim invaders in the 12th and 13th centuries. By that time, Buddhism had already been established in other countries, such as Sri Lanka, China, Tibet, etc., where it has been preserved till today. It disappeared nearly completely, however, from its country of origin.

Even though my historical knowledge is superficial, I am aware that the Buddhist scriptures are highly impermanent in nature. Their survival for future generations is not a given but depends on the wise decisions of their upholders in each generation anew.

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