

*Unending
Auspiciousness*

THE SUTRA OF THE RECOLLECTION OF
THE NOBLE THREE JEWELS
WITH COMMENTARIES BY JU MIPHAM,
TARANATHA, AND THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER 2 EXCERPTED:
TRANSLATION ISSUES
RAISED BY THE SUTRA

BY TONY DUFF
PADMA KARPO TRANSLATION COMMITTEE

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TRANSLATION ISSUES RAISED BY THE SUTRA AND ITS COMMENTARIES

Translations of Tibetan Buddhist texts into other languages often require comments from the translator about issues that came up during the translation from Tibetan. This is particularly true with the *Sutra* and its commentaries.

Before going on, it is important to say that this chapter is about words, their meanings, and how they are translated. Readers who are more interested in the central meaning of the *Sutra*, which is the development of faith through its practice, could pass over this chapter and move on to the next, though they should first consider the following two points. Firstly, the faith of Buddhists is an informed faith and one of the many avenues to informed faith in the Three Jewels is to learn their qualities through precisely understanding the words used to describe their qualities. This chapter does that, so, whether one is interested in translation issues or not, this chapter will help to develop one's understanding of the Three Jewels and to cultivate one's faith in them. Secondly, the commentaries explain the

process that was followed when certain terms were translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. These explanations were written out in brief for Tibetans who have already understood the various issues involved and they do not address the issues as they apply to other languages. This chapter is useful for all readers because it fills out these explanations so that they are clear and one gains more knowledge of the Three Jewels by reading them. In addition, the chapter is useful for translators because it discusses these issues as they apply to the work of translating into languages other than Tibetan.

In general, the *Sutra* is a list of many important Buddhist terms that shows how the terms were translated into Tibetan. A study of it will be a very informative for anyone involved with the translation of Tibetan Buddhist works into other languages. Such a study will help translators to increase their vocabulary of Sanskrit and Tibetan terminology.

In particular, all three of the commentaries to the *Sutra* that are contained in this book raise a variety of translation issues. For example, they reveal places where the Tibetan translation does not readily convey the meaning of the original Pali or Sanskrit wording, which is useful in a number of ways. The commentaries also point out differences of translation between editions of the *Sutra* then comment on them, which is a valuable learning opportunity for translators.

It is especially valuable that the two Tibetan commentaries document the approach that the early Tibetan translators

took while translating a number of key terms from Sanskrit into Tibetan. When the commentaries do this, they lay out the official Tibetan translation rationales for the terms. This gives a clear view of the process that went on when the early Tibetan translators developed the vocabulary needed to translate from the Indian language into the Tibetan one, something that provides important knowledge for translators in general, though two points stand out. First, the presentations form an excellent basis for investigating how these terms should be translated into other languages, with those investigations in turn providing us with a model for how to translate Buddhist terms into other languages. Second, the presentations highlight something that is often not well known and understood, that the process of translating from the Indian language into the Tibetan one had considerable difficulties and was not always perfect.

Translation Difficulties for All

It is well known in translation circles altogether—not just in Buddhist ones—that translation from one language into another inevitably results in some loss of meaning. It is equally well known that translation from something that is already a translation is much less desirable than translation from the original source and can have significant problems with it. Both of these points apply to the translation of Indian Buddhist works into Tibetan and Tibetan Buddhist works into English. It might be surprising to hear that Tibetans had their own share of problems when translating from Sanskrit into Tibetan though it is a point that is known and discussed these days amongst Western transla-

tors who have a large body of experience, especially the few who have lived with Tibetans for many years.

I have had Tibetan Buddhist translators tell me that the translations of Indian Buddhist works into Tibetan were perfect and that the Tibetan texts that resulted are a perfect basis for translating works into other languages. A little probing usually reveals that they are just spouting Tibetan lore that their Tibetan teachers have told them and have not given proper consideration to it. Let us have a brief look at the story of Tibetan translations of Buddhist works.

The story begins with Thumi (also known as Thonmi) Sambhota who is often referred to as the inventor of Tibetan language, and who is worshipped by Tibetans for that, his contribution to the founding of Tibetan culture. In fact, Thumi did not invent Tibetan language, though his work had an effect of similar proportions. He created a lettering set and a grammar for the existing, spoken Tibetan language, turning it into a fully defined language that could be used as the basis for the more sophisticated culture, and a Buddhist one in particular, envisaged by the king, Srongtsen Gampo. A cursory examination of the history of the events has led some to say that Thumi Sambhota built a new Tibetan language based on Sanskrit, but that also is not true. He went to India and studied Indian languages extensively, then returned to Tibet where he created a form for the already-existing, spoken Tibetan language. In doing so, he retained the Tibetan spoken language but gave it a form that allowed Indian Buddhist texts, written in Sanskrit and its variations, to be translated into Tibetan language to a

remarkable degree of accuracy¹. Contrary to popular belief, he did not make the Tibetan language into a carbon copy of Sanskrit and, as a result, many problems were encountered during the task of translating Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan language.

About two hundred years after Thumi Sambhota created the basis for the translation of Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan language, there was a period of about one hundred years during which the bulk of the work of translation was done and the re-done in order to finalize it. The lore that has grown up amongst Tibetans in regard to that great work of translation is that the translations were perfect. When Tibetans present the matter to Westerners, they tend to pass on that lore as absolute fact instead of giving more careful consideration to what actually happened. Their stance makes for faith in the scripture that resulted and faith is key to the journey to enlightenment so their faith is not something to undermine without reason. However, blind faith has to give way to informed faith and with that in mind, translators need to be attuned to what actually happened during the great translations of Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan language.

What happened during the great translations can be summed up like this. Although the meaning of the original Indian texts was generally very well represented in the

¹ A very complete presentation of this history can be found in *Standard Tibetan Grammar Volume I: The Thirty Verses of Minister Thumi* by Tony Duff, published by Padma Karpo Translation Committee.

Tibetan translations, and sometimes perfectly so, the translation work did have its problems and was, when you look at the details, not perfect. The problems were documented by order of the king at the time for the sake of people like ourselves who, in the future, might need to know about these things. They were documented in a text called *The Second Tome on Grammatical Composition* and the text was preserved in the Various section of the Tibetan *Translated Treatises* (its title meaning that it was a second treatise on language coming after Thumi's original set of treatises that gave form to Tibetan language). The important point is that, although there were many problems with language during the great translation effort, these problems did not turn into an obstacle for the transmission of Buddhism into Tibetan culture. To understand why not, we have to remember that the Buddha's teaching is transmitted in two ways: by realization and by word, with the word later becoming scripture. The problems with translation concerned scripture not realization. It is universally agreed that the transmission of realization into Tibet was perfect. This realization informed the Tibetan Buddhist culture with the result that the translations of scripture, regardless of problems encountered during their translation, could be correctly understood. In that sense, the translations from Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan language were not perfect but became perfect.

Having clarified that, we could look at specific words that the early Tibetan translators dealt with to get a feeling for some of the problems they faced. Because of the parallels that Thumi Sambhota created between the Sanskrit and Tibetan languages, Sanskrit words sometimes would go

perfectly into Tibetan. For example, the commonly used word “paramārtha” in Sanskrit goes perfectly into its Tibetan equivalent དམ་པའི་དོན་ “dam pa’i don”, with even the etymological parts of the Sanskrit term being fully present². It is a perfect translation in every way. (Incidentally, it can be made to go nicely into English in a similar way by choosing the appropriate roots and combining them: “superfact”.)

There were many times when a Sanskrit word could not be broken into its etymological parts and rebuilt into a perfectly-matching Tibetan equivalent. On those occasions, the Tibetan translators had to borrow existing terms or invent new ones to do the translation. Sometimes, they borrowed an existing Tibetan word and assigned it as the official equivalent of the Sanskrit one, giving the word a new range of meaning in the process. There are many words like that in the Tibetan Buddhist vocabulary and many examples of them in the *Sutra*. Sometimes, they invented a new word, and assigned it as the official equivalent of the Sanskrit, an example of which is found in the *Sutra* with the translation of the Sanskrit “buddha” into Tibetan with སངས་རྒྱས་ “sang s rgyas”. There were even cases where they created a new word which they assigned as the equivalent of a Sanskrit term but whose meaning did not exactly match the original, examples of which are found in the *Sutra* with the translations of the Sanskrit words arhat and bhagavat into Tibetan with དག་བཅོམ་པ་ “dgra bcom pa” and བཅོམ་ལྷན་འདས་ “bcom ldan ’das” respectively. There were yet other cases where they felt that a Tibetan word that had been accepted as the official equivalent for a given Sanskrit

² See superfactual in the glossary.

word failed to capture the meaning in particular contexts. Therefore, they either chose another word, so that there were now two (and sometimes many more) equivalents for the one Sanskrit word, or made up a new word again. An example of needing to make up a new Tibetan word to match a particular usage of a Sanskrit word can be found in the *Sutra* with the translation of the Sanskrit word *ratna* when it is being used to refer to the Three Jewels; the newly constructed Tibetan word was དཀོན་མཆོག་ “*dkon mchog*”.

Now how does all of the above affect those who are now going a step further and translating Tibetan Buddhist works into languages such as English, and so on? As mentioned earlier, it is generally accepted that using a translation as a basis for a translation is not desirable. It is much better to turn to the original language and use that as a basis. However, in the case of translating Tibetan Buddhist works, there is the major problem that the texts of the source language, Sanskrit, have, for the most part, ceased to exist. Therefore we have to rely on the Tibetan works. However, because, as the Tibetans themselves have explained, the Tibetan translations are not perfect, we cannot just go ahead and translate from the Tibetan into our language without investigating the Tibetan system of translation.

In the case where Tibetan words are etymological replicas of the Sanskrit, as with the term *paramārtha* mentioned above, it will not matter whether the Sanskrit or Tibetan is used as the basis for the translation into another language. However, in most other cases, using the Tibetan term as a basis for translation into another language can bring problems. This is the point where a translation of a translation

does not always work and the translator has to turn to the original or source language, if possible, and work from there. As the translator considers the terminology and how to translate it, he will want to know what the Tibetan translators did in relation to these terms. That is possible in some cases because the rationale for the translation of Sanskrit words into the Tibetan language was documented in a number of cases by the early Tibetan translators.

The Rationales of Tibetan Translation

Without looking further than the title of the *Sutra*, we can find a term that has given both Tibetan and English translators trouble. It is the case, mentioned just above, of the Sanskrit term “ratna” when used to refer to the Three Jewels of refuge. This term was problematic for the Tibetans. An equivalent for its most general meaning already existed in the Tibetan language—the word རིན་ཆེན་ “rin chen” meaning “valuable, rich”. However, ratna has other meanings, including the one intended in the case of the Three Jewels, of something jewel-like. The existing equivalent did not convey that meaning clearly enough, so the translators invented a new term to meet the needs of this particular usage, then wrote a rationale for the translation.

This rationale and the many others like it set out the reasoning that went with a translation for people of future generations. The rationales have been faithfully preserved and presented within the tradition for three purposes: to explain the meaning of the source terms, to provide the reasoning behind the choice of translated terms, and thereby to ratify the translation. With that, the work of the translators was complete and their rationales needed only to

be faithfully handed down by successive generations of Tibetan Buddhists—which they were.

It is very important to realize that the rationales behind the translations of Sanskrit into Tibetan words are connected with and particular to the functioning of Tibetan language. Thus, although it has been widely assumed that these rationales can and do apply in the translation of these terms into Western languages, it could be a mistaken assumption. To find out whether this is so, we will examine several of the terms at the beginning of the *Sutra* that have a Tibetan translation rationale and see whether that rationale is applicable to translations made into other languages or not. All of the examples we will use were referenced above when the examples of various situations faced by the Tibetan translators were being laid out. Through this we will find out that the rationales for Tibetan translation are not universally applicable even though they are very informative.

The Meaning and Translation of “ratna”

The title of the *Sutra* in Sanskrit is “ārya ratna traya anu-smṛti sūtra”. In it, “ratna traya” or “Three Jewels” refers to the buddha, dharma, and saṅgha as the three refuges of Buddhism.

The Sanskrit “ratna” is used in several ways. In general, it means “value, valuable, having the quality of richness” and was frequently used with that meaning in Indian Buddhist texts. However, it is also used to refer to precious things, for instance jewels. When the Buddha called the three refuges the three ratnas, he meant that they were a set of

three things with the qualities of jewels. He explained that these three jewels of refuge are very rare for beings to connect with, that they are very precious given their good qualities, that they are very valuable given that they are the basis for becoming enlightened, and so on.

The Buddha's teachings on the meaning of the Three Jewels are important to the topic of taking refuge. One way to get a feel for them is to look at the listings made in Indian Buddhist literature in which the qualities of the Three Jewels are explained to be equivalent to six qualities of jewels. 1) The Three Jewels are "byung bar dkon pa <> rare in occurrence" because they are only discovered when beings have accumulated sufficient merit to meet with them, which is similar to jewels being very rare and difficult to find. 2) The Three Jewels are "dri ma med pa <> stainless" because they are naturally free of stain, similar to jewels being free of stain by nature. 3) The Three Jewels are "mthu dang ldan pa <> powerful" because they have the capacity to benefit oneself and others, similar to jewels having the capacity to accomplish one's wishes. 4) The Three Jewels are " 'jig rten gyi rgyan <> ornaments for the world" because they beautify the beings of the world by producing virtuous thoughts in them, similar to jewels beautifying the persons who wear them. 5) The Three Jewels are "mchog tu gyur pa <> supreme" because there is nothing better than them in this world, similar to jewels being regarded as supreme things of this world. 6) The Three Jewels are " 'gyur ba med pa <> unchanging" because they are by nature without change, similar to jewels being everlasting and without change.

Tibetan language has a term for translating ratna when its general meaning is intended: རིན་ཆེན་ “rin chen” literally meaning “valuable”. However, this Tibetan term does not show the meaning of precious things such as jewels that is also conveyed by ratna, so the early Tibetan translators set it aside as insufficient for translating ratna when used to refer to the Three Jewels of refuge. The translators could not find an existing Tibetan term that was fitting so they were forced to invent one for the purpose. They looked at the summary listing of six qualities of the Three Jewels that was available in Sanskrit literature and can be seen immediately above and decided that two of those six terms encapsulated the jewel-like meaning of ratna: དགོན་ “dkon <> rare” and མཆོག་ “mchog <> supreme”. The two words were combined into དགོན་མཆོག་ “dkon mchog” which was set as the official Tibetan equivalent for ratna when used to refer to the Three Jewels. Following that, the translators wrote down the rationale for their translation for the information of future generations.

Now, how should we translate this usage of ratna into English? Should we presume that the Tibetan rationale is a rationale that is true for all languages? Or, should we understand that it was for the Tibetan context and might very well be suitable only for that? Should we see that the Tibetan is a translation already and acknowledge the principle that translators in general understand, that a translation is not generally suitable as a basis for translation? Or, should we literally translate the Tibetan into English?

If we literally translate the term ratna into English on the basis of the invented Tibetan term, we get something like

“rare and supreme ones”. This has been done by a number of English translators but is very flawed as we can easily see. Firstly—and as the Tibetans themselves freely admit—“dkon mchog” is not a perfect translation but a word invented to point in the right direction. Secondly, it does not have all of the meanings that the Buddha taught for this use of ratna but only two of them, so it only approximates the meaning. Therefore, if we use the Tibetan as a basis for a literal English translation, the translation will inherit those faults; we will lose meaning and arrive at a less-than-precise translation of the original term. On top of that, attempts so far have resulted in unwieldy phrases in English, entirely unsuited to the term’s position as one of the main terms of the Buddhist vocabulary; note that neither the Sanskrit nor Tibetan terms have this fault, each being short and eminently suited to their task.

If, instead of using the Tibetan translation and its rationale as a basis for an English translation, we use the original language, Sanskrit, we find that the term ratna in this specific usage corresponds exactly to the English word “jewel”. We tread the same paths of thought that the Tibetans did but, unlike them, we find that we already have a word in the target language that fulfills our requirements. Thus, there is no need to use the Tibetan term as a basis for the translation and by not doing so we avoid all the faults mentioned above.

This highlights two very important points. First, it is an excellent example of why using a translation of a translation rather than a direct translation from a source language is undesirable. Second, it shows that it can be a mistake to

follow the rationale that the Tibetan translators gave for their translations. It is very important to realize that their rationales were not intended as the one, correct rationale for translations into all languages, but as a correct one for their own, Tibetan language.

In sum, we should not slavishly use the translations made for the Tibetan language as a basis for our own translations. Instead, we should try to find a word in our own language that fits the source language, Sanskrit, where possible. If one cannot be found, we might consider doing what the Tibetans did, which is to make our own word. Certainly, the English language, with its wide range of roots, is eminently suited to that task. The Tibetan rationales for translation should be studied in conjunction with this because they will inform the work. Once we have selected or created our word, we must—as I have done here—write a rationale for that. Later still, when it has been understood that this rationale is correct, that rationale should become the standard explanation of the word for the language in question, paralleling what happened in Tibetan culture.

The Meaning and Translation of “buddha”

Next, there is the word “buddha” at the beginning of the body of the *Sutra*. There is a very clear explanation of the meaning of the word buddha in the Sanskrit language. Its root is “budh” which conveys the sense of illumination with knowledge, an absence of darkness within the sphere of knowing. Moreover, the primary synonym for “buddha” in Sanskrit is the word “avagamana” which translates as “full

comprehension” or “full realization”³. From a Sanskrit perspective, the main sense conveyed by the word buddha is knowledge, and knowledge that has had all obscuring factors removed from it. Please note that it does not have the sense of “waking” or “awakening” conveyed with it, about which more is said below. The above, by the way, is the result of study and much discussion with many scholars, especially the learned Brahmans of Varanasi who hold the lineage of Sanskrit in India nowadays. Furthermore, the explanations of Tāranātha and Mipham clearly support this understanding that the main meaning in “buddha” is knowledge, illumination. A buddha, according to the meaning of the word itself, is an enlightened one, not an awakened one!

Again the Tibetan translators did not use a literal translation but invented a new word in order to translate this word buddha. Their new word was སྤྲུལ་རྒྱལ་ “sangs rgyas”. There is a very clear explanation of how the term was derived in my own commentary, which is reproduced in brief below, and Mipham also gives the rationale for it.

To make their word, the Tibetan translators relied on a famous description of the Buddha that existed in Sanskrit poetry. The poetry likened the Buddha to a lotus, picking out two particular features of a lotus that were applicable. A lotus starts in and grows up from a filthy swamp. When

³ The official Tibetan equivalent for avagamana is “rtogs pa”. The Tibetan term is usually translated into English with “realization” though it contains more meaning than that. It means “full comprehension” or “full knowledge”. See realization in the glossary.

it has elevated itself some distance above and thus cleared itself of all the filth, it blossoms into a beautiful flower with many good qualities. The poetry makes it clear that the two, pertinent features are “being cleaned out” and “blossoming into something full of good qualities”. The Tibetans chose the two words from their language that matched these features—སངས་ “sangs” and རྒྱས་ “rgyas” respectively, combined them, and arrived at the new word སངས་རྒྱས་ “sangs rgyas”.

It is particularly important to understand that the primary meaning of སངས་ “sangs” is “to be cleared out”. For example, I have heard some Tibetan experts explain it as “to have pollution cleared out, as happens when the windows of a stuffy room are opened”. This is the meaning intended in the original poetry; for a buddha, the obscurations of mind that would prevent total knowledge have been cleared. There is a secondary meaning in Tibetan only in which “sangs” is equated with the verb སད་པ་ “sad pa <> to wake up”. Some Tibetans, not knowing of the Sanskrit poetry and its meaning, have assumed that this secondary meaning for སངས་ “sangs” is the correct one then mistakenly explain “buddha” to mean “awakened and blossomed”. The mistake is compounded when Western translators take that as proof that “buddha” means “Awakened One”, then set that as the correct translation. This has happened and people have become very attached to what their teacher has said and reluctant to hear that it might be mistaken. For this reason, we non-Tibetans have to start with the Sanskrit language and its own definitions; from that we understand that the word buddha conveys the idea of knowledge that has been cleared of contamination, not awakening.

It is important to note that one *could* say that the Buddha is an awakened person; it is an apt metaphor! However, it is *not* the metaphor that was in use when the Tibetans derived their word “sangs rgyas” and therefore could not be used to inform the translation into other languages of the word buddha.

In short, and as Mipham observes in his commentary, the Tibetan word སངས་རྒྱལ་ “sangs rgyas” describes a buddha but is not a straightforward translation of the original term. Moreover, it bears the danger of a mistaken understanding that can lead to a mistaken translation, as just noted. Thus, the Tibetan word is not a suitable basis for an English translation. Again, there is a word in English already that serves the purpose exactly.

Another point of translation that surfaces here is the fact that the English language and other European languages are much closer to Sanskrit linguistically and have stronger ties to it culturally than to the Tibetan language. Thus, it often happens that Buddhist words can be translated into English without having to rely on the Tibetan, which is already a translation.

There is yet another and no less important point that surfaces here. In Sanskrit, the two words buddha and bodhi have the same root “budh”. The connection between the two words is immediately obvious in the course of using the language, and that immediately promotes the acquisition of meaning. The Tibetans lost this great advantage when they did not translate the root “budh” with one Tibetan term and then create variants on it. The Tibetan translators pro-

duced different words to represent the derivatives of *budh*, none of which have an obvious connection. Contrast this with English: finding that there is an excellent match—enlighten—for “*budh*” in English, we can easily build translations of cognate terms whose connections are readily apparent. For example, *buddha* and *bodhi* become “enlightened one” and “enlightenment” respectively. This is a small but very important point in translation of Buddhist language.

The Meaning and Translation of “bhagavat”

The next word in the *Sutra* is “*bhagavat*”. This ancient Indian term was and still is used as a term of high respect for someone who is considered to be very holy and this is how the term should be understood. It did not ever, in the Indian system, refer exclusively to the Buddha.

The Indian term *bhagavat*, which is also used in the form *bhagavan* without any change of meaning or etymology, is comprised of the two roots “*bhaga*” meaning “defeat” and “*vat*” meaning “in possession of”. In Indian culture, it is explained to refer to a person who has or *possesses* the good quality of having overcome or *defeated* negativities that hold beings back from being holy. Negative aspects of being were generally personified in ancient India as “the four maras”, whose name means the four types of negative forces that kill the possibilities of goodness⁴. Thus, *bhagavan* ends up meaning a person who has the good quality of having defeated the four maras.

⁴ For maras, see the glossary.

Now the Hindu system, when speaking of its great god Śhiva—also called Iśhvara because he is the “Almighty God” of the system—and all of the other great gods of its pantheon such as Indra, Brahmā, and Viṣṇu, and also the other holy beings of its system such as Kṛiṣṇa, states that in the positive sense a bhagavat possesses the qualities of being “fortunate” in general or “good in six ways⁵”. Buddhism uses this same explanation of the etymology of bhagavat, though when it explains sixfold goodness for a buddha, it explains that it is a result of practising the six paramitas, which differs from the explanation given in the Hindu system for Śhiva and the others of the Hindu pantheon.

Turning now to the Tibetan language, it is important to understand that all of the terminology involved translates perfectly: bhaga is བཅོམ་ “bcom”, vat is ལྷན་ “ldan”, and bhagavat is the two combined to give བཅོམ་ལྷན་ “bcom ldan”. The fortune involved is སྐལ་བ་ “skal ba” and the sixfold goodness is ལེགས་པ་དུག་ “legs pa drug”. Thus, the Tibetan translators could have simply and perfectly translated bhagavat with བཅོམ་ལྷན་ “bcom ldan”. However, they did not.

The Tibetan translators state in the rationale for their translation of bhagavat that to translate it literally as བཅོམ་ལྷན་ “bcom ldan” would not be sufficient because it would then refer to any kind of holy being—including those of non-Buddhist religions, such as were listed above—and not just

⁵ Tib. legs pa drug. A bhagavat has the six goodnesses of: 1) “dbang phyug” dominion over others; 2) “gzugs bzang” an excellent body; 3) “dpal” glory; 4) “grags” fame; 5) “ye shes” wisdom; and 6) “brtson ’grus” perseverance.

to the Buddha. They looked at how to augment the meaning of “bcom ldan” so that it would refer only to a buddha type of bhagavat and saw that, if the word འདས་ “ ’das < transcended” were simply added to indicate transcendence over the two types of obscuration⁶, it would create a listing of three qualities in one word—defeat of the four maras, possession of the six goodneses, and transcendence over the two obscurations—that could refer only to a buddha. Their new term, བཅོམ་ལྷན་འདས་ “bcom ldan ’das”, was no longer an exact translation of the original Sanskrit word bhagavat; it was now a description of a *buddha* type of bhagavat in particular.

It is generally accepted that all the holy beings of Indian religions—Śhiva, and so on—have conquered the four māras and thereby come to possess the six good qualities but, according to Buddhism at least, only a buddha has transcended both of the two obscurations. Using the process explained just above, this understanding has been embodied in the Tibetan translation of bhagavat. Commentaries on the *Sutra* then connect “bhagavat” to “buddha” as follows. One of the prime definitions of a buddha is abandonment and realization; a buddha is one who has abandoned all that needs to be abandoned and realized all that there is to be realized. In relation to that, although persons who have defeated the four maras have abandoned a great deal of what needs to be abandoned and ones who

⁶ The two obscurations are the coarser obscuration to being all-knowing of having afflictions and a subtler one which prevents total knowledge even when the coarser ones have been removed.

have come to possess goodness have realized much of what there is to be realized, they do not achieve full abandonment and realization until they transcend both of the two obscurations. Thus, the various gods and holy beings do have abandonment and realization, just as their respective religions claim. However, they do not have the perfection of full abandonment and realization which is the hallmark of a buddha. In this way, an explanation of bhagavat leads to an explanation of the meaning of buddha.

It is plain from the foregoing that the Tibetan translation of bhagavat is *not* a translation of the original word but an invention made to fit the translators' wish that the term refer only to a *buddha* bhagavat. This to me is a very surprising situation. It is regarded within Tibetan Buddhist circles in general that the willful addition of meaning is a major fault for a translator. Yet here is a case where the venerable Tibetan translators deliberately added meaning to a word so that it would reflect their particular teacher as the holy of holies! They claimed that they needed the addition in order to specify more clearly to whom bhagavat refers. However, anyone who has lived for a period in India will know that one can always tell which bhagavat is being referred to by context. In other words, no meaning would have been lost by translating the original Sanskrit word literally and without further addition. We have already established that the Tibetan rationales for translation should not be taken as universally applicable. The case here shows, moreover, that we must be extremely careful when using these rationales.

Given that we have no word that matches bhagavat in English and given that a literal translation of the Tibetan term is simply unusable in its unwieldiness, bhagavat seems best brought into English without translating it.

The Meaning and Translation of “arhat”

Then there is the Sanskrit term “arhat”. The term is explained according to Tibetan understanding to be derived from the Sanskrit word “arhan” meaning “to be worthy of praise” or “venerable”. This fits with the Buddha’s explanation that an arhat is a person who has extricated himself from samsara and has therefore become noble, spiritually speaking, compared to those who are still in samsara. This new, higher position that makes an arhat worthy of praise or veneration.

Unexpectedly then, the Tibetan translators have translated arhat with དགའ་བཅོམ་པ་ “dgra bcom pa” meaning “one who has defeated the enemy”. The rationale given is that, “An arhat in the Buddhist tradition is someone who has *defeated* (བཅོམ་ bcom) the principal *enemy* (དགའ་ dgra) of sentient beings, the afflictions⁷”. Professor Jeffrey Hopkins has nicely translated the Tibetan into English with “foe destroyer”.

Interestingly, Professor Hahn and other very learned European Sanskritists regard the position taken in Tibetan scholarship that the root of arhat is “arhan” as a mistake that has developed in Tibetan circles. They point out that there is the Sanskrit combination of words “arī han” which means exactly “defeated the enemy”. They maintain that “arī han”

⁷ For affliction, see the glossary.

is the root of arhat and that, therefore, the Tibetan term is a perfect translation! This difference of opinion over whether the root of arhat is arhan or ari han and, therefore, whether the meaning of arhat is “worthy of praise” or “foe destroyer” has not been resolved. It certainly is deserving of further study. The best way to resolve it would be to look into the discourses of the Buddha and see if the Buddha or his disciples said something that would determine it without question.

The Meaning and Translation of “sūtra”

Mipham explains in his commentary that the word “sūtra” conveys the sense of something that is the root or heart of some matter. In fact, the Sanskrit word means “that which was told for others to hear”. Tibetans translated it with their word མདོ་ “mdo” literally meaning “a point of confluence” which, in this context, comes to mean “the heart of the matter”. In this case, the Tibetans used a word whose meaning does not correspond to the literal meaning of the original term. If we were to translate the Tibetan into English we would stray far from the actual meaning. However this problem is solved because the Sanskrit word has already become standard usage in English.

The Meaning and Translation of “sugata”

The Sanskrit “sugata” is translated into Tibetan with བདེ་གསལ་གསལ་ “bde gshegs”. This is as perfect a translation as can be made given that བདེ་ “bde” is the exact equivalent of “su” and གསལ་གསལ་ “gshegs” the exact equivalent of “gata”. This is an example of a Sanskrit word that goes perfectly into Tibetan but not into English.

The Sanskrit “su” and its Tibetan equivalent བདེ་ “bde” are used to refer to good situations of all types, situations in which there is no problem. The terms indicate the entire range of the good side of things—happy, easy, pleasant, nice, comfortable, blissful, and so on. We have no means to convey this in English so, although sugata is usually translated with something like “the one gone to bliss”, this does not capture the meaning of “su”. The term sugata actually means “the one gone to an easy, excellent, pleasant, fine, wonderful state with nothing bad about it”—the word “bliss” alone conveys the wrong meaning.

There is a second difficulty which is that the one word both in Sanskrit and Tibetan has two meanings because “gata” or གསེམས་ “gshegs” means both “gone” and “went”. The word sugata equally means one who has gone to the goodness of enlightenment and one who went on a path which was pleasant and good to take. The Buddhist path is defined as being easy, pleasant, comfortable to travel, and so on and its fruition is defined as a place of ease, a place that is pleasant, comfortable, and so on; the one particle “su” refers to both path and fruition possibilities. Therefore, sugata does not quite mean “gone to bliss” as it is usually translated because it equally means “went blissfully”.

Indian Buddhism goes further and explains the meaning of this word sugata with a set of synonyms, each of which sheds further light on the meaning of a buddha. Sugata meaning “gone blissfully to bliss” also means: ལེགས་པར་གསེམས་པ་ “legs par gshegs pa <> gone well to goodness” or མངོས་པར་གསེམས་པ་ “mdzes par gshegs pa <> gone beautifully to beauty”, སྤང་མི་ལྲོག་པར་གསེམས་པ་ “slar mi ldog par gshegs pa <> gone irreversibly to

irreversibility”, རབ་ཏུ་གཤེགས་པ་ “rab tu gshegs pa <> gone utterly to utterness”, and མ་ལུས་པར་གཤེགས་པ་ “ma lus par gshegs pa <> gone not missing anything to nothing missed” or རྫོགས་པར་གཤེགས་པ་ “rdzogs par gshegs pa <> gone completely to completeness”. These various terms are explained at length in the commentaries of Tāranātha and Mipham, and those commentaries should be consulted in conjunction with the explanation here.

The Meaning and Translation of “upanāyika”

One of the epithets in the original recollection of dharma taught by the Buddha is “upanāyika”. Its translation is a very interesting exercise for two reasons. Firstly, it is a specific term from ancient Hindu culture which is not frequently used and which will barely be known to people in other cultures. It would be very easy to miss its meaning because of it. Secondly, the Tibetan translators could not agree on a single term for its translation. It is an example that shows the difficulties of translation and which also proves that the process of translating from the Indian language into the Tibetan one was not perfect.

The term “upanāyika” refers to the specific situation in which a young Hindu man is taken to his family’s Hindu guru in order to prepare him spiritually. The guru takes the young man, draws him right up to himself, then empowers him into the Hindu understanding of liberation, which the guru represents. The meaning contained in that has been applied to the dharma in the Buddhist recollections of the Three Jewels. The dharma, as the final state of realization, is represented through its conventional teaching. That takes hold of us, draws us in from the far-removed state of

samsara, bringing us closer and closer, then finally causes us to merge with the final state of realization.

Having uncovered the meaning of the Sanskrit term, we find that it can be literally and correctly translated into English with “brings one in” and that is how its occurrence in the *Sutra* has been translated in this book.

The Tibetans had more difficulty with it. The Tibetan experts whom I consulted agree that the official Tibetan translation is ཉེ་བར་གཏོང་པ་ “nye bar gtod pa”. However, this term is so rarely used that it is almost unknown in the Tibetan dharma language, a problem which is compounded by the fact that the actual meaning is not obvious from the words in the Tibetan phrase. The Tibetan words convey that something aims and sends you *away* in a certain direction. However, that is the wrong way around. Therefore, some Tibetan translators rejected the official equivalent for this term and instead used the phrase ཉེ་བར་འབྲེན་པ་ “nye bar ’dren pa” to translate it. It literally means “to lead in close”, which is the required sense.

Tāranātha also notes that one Tibetan translator translated it with “having insight”. He would have done so in deference to the fact that the finally point of this process is that one is brought into the dharma of realization, which is insight into superfactual truth. Tāranātha rightly says, “If that were so, it would have to be ‘uparyayika’, so his explanation does not quite fit”.

This is another case where translating from the Tibetan into English will not go well, where we have to look at the

original term, in Sanskrit, and translate from that into English, as has been done here.

Differences of Translation and Explanation of the *Sutra*

The previous section focussed on the rationales of Tibetan translation that appear in the course of examining the *Sutra* and how they can be used to inform the work of translation into other languages. There are also, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, other aspects to this *Sutra* and its commentaries that are useful for translators. One of them is that there are different editions of the *Sutra* because of different ways of translating the words in it. In fact, as pointed out in the first chapter, there are sufficient differences in the wordings of various editions of the *Sutra* that there cannot be one, all-encompassing translation of the *Sutra* into English. This is an important point not only for translators but for anyone studying the *Sutra* in depth. Because the differences are so valuable to study, I have covered them fully in my own commentary. There are also differences in the way that the commentaries explain the epithets of the *Sutra*. Again, these differences are valuable for translators to study and again, for that reason, I have covered them fully in my own commentary.



GLOSSARY

Affliction, Skt. kleśha, Tib. nyon mongs: This term is usually translated as emotion or disturbing emotion, etcetera, but the Buddha was very specific about the meaning of this word. When the Buddha referred to the emotions, meaning a movement of mind, he did not refer to them as such but called them “kleśha” in Sanskrit, meaning exactly “affliction”. It is a basic part of the Buddhist teaching that emotions afflict beings, giving them problems at the time and causing more problems in the future.

Fictional and superfactual: Fictional and superfactual are our greatly improved translations for “relative” and “absolute” respectively. Briefly, the original Sanskrit word for fiction means a deliberately produced *fiction* and refers to the world projected by a mind controlled by ignorance. The original word for superfact means “that *superior fact* that appears on the surface of the mind of a noble one who has transcended saṃsāra” and refers to reality seen as it actually is. Relative and absolute do not convey this meaning at all and, when they are used, the meaning being presented is simply lost.

Mara, Skt. māra, Tib. bdud: A Sanskrit term closely related to the word “death”. Buddha spoke of four classes of extremely negative influences that have the capacity to drag

a sentient being deep into saṃsāra. They are the “maras” or “kiss of death”: of having a saṃsāric set of five skandhas; of having afflictions; of death itself; and of the son of gods, which means being seduced and taken in totally by sensuality.

Realization, Tib. rtogs pa: Realization has a very specific meaning: it refers to correct knowledge that has been gained in such a way that the knowledge does not abate. There are two important points here. Firstly, realization is not absolute. It refers to the removal of obscurations, one at a time. Each time that a practitioner removes an obscuration, he gains a realization because of it. Therefore, there are as many levels of realization as there are obscurations. Maitreya, in the *Ornament of Manifest Realizations*, shows how the removal of the various obscurations that go with each of the three realms of saṃsāric existence produces realization.

Secondly, realization is stable or, as the Tibetan wording says, “unchanging”. As Guru Rinpoche pointed out, “Intellectual knowledge is like a patch, it drops away; experiences on the path are temporary, they evaporate like mist; realization is unchanging”.

A special usage of “realization” is found in the Essence Mahāmudrā and Great Completion teachings. There, realization is the term used to describe what happens at the moment when mindness is actually met during either introduction to or self-recognition of mindness. It is called realization because, in that glimpse, one actually directly sees the innate wisdom mind. The realization has not been stabilized but it is realization.

Superfactual, Skt. paramārtha, Tib. don dam: This term is paired with the term “fictional” *q.v.* Until now these two terms have been translated as “relative” and “absolute” but those translations are nothing like the original terms. These

terms are extremely important in the Buddhist teaching so it is very important that their translations be corrected but, more than that, if the actual meaning of these terms is not presented, the teaching connected with them cannot be understood.

The Sanskrit term literally means “a superior or holy kind of fact” and refers to the wisdom mind possessed by those who have developed themselves spiritually to the point of having transcended saṃsāra. That wisdom is *superior* to an ordinary, un-developed person’s consciousness and the *facts* that appear on its surface are superior compared to the facts that appear on the ordinary person’s consciousness. Therefore, it is superfact or the holy fact, more literally. What this wisdom knows is true for the beings who have it, therefore what the wisdom sees is superfactual truth.



Tony Duff has spent a lifetime pursuing the Buddha's teaching and transmitting it to others. In the early 1970's, during his post-graduate studies in molecular biology, he went to Asia and met the Buddhist teachings of various South-east Asian countries. He met Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal and has followed it since. After his trip he abandoned worldly life and was the first monk ordained in his home country of Australia. Together with several others, he founded the monastery called Chenrezig Institute for Wisdom Culture where he studied and practised the Gelugpa teachings for several years under the guidance of Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa, Geshe Lodan, and Zasep Tulku. After that, he offered back his ordination and left for the USA to study the Kagyu teachings with the incomparable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Tony was very active in the community and went through all possible levels of training that were available during his twelve year stay. He was also a core member of the Nalanda Translation Committee. After Chogyam Trungpa died, Tony went to live in Nepal where he worked as the personal translator for Tsoknyi Rinpoche and also translated for several other well-known teachers. He also founded and directed the largest Tibetan text preservation project in Asia, the Drukpa Kagyu Heritage Project, which he oversaw for eight years. He also established the Padma Karpo Translation Committee which has produced many fine translations and made many resources for translators such as the highly acclaimed *Illuminator Tibetan-English Dictionary*. After the year 2000, Tony focussed primarily on obtaining Dzogchen teachings from the best teachers available, especially within Tibet, and translating and teaching them. He has received much approval from many teachers and has been given the titles "lotsawa" and "lama" and been strongly encouraged by them to teach Westerners. One way he does that is by producing these fine translations.

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