

Interview with Gedun Rabsal

On March 18, 2022, the editors of *The Journal of Tibetan Literature* Andrew Quintman, Kurtis Schaeffer, and Tenzin Dickie met with Gedun Rabsal on Zoom to discuss the origin story of his new Tibetan rendition of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (*Lamla*), his fascination with Ernest Hemingway, his approach to the practice of translation, and the importance of modern English literature for a Tibetan reading audience. The first portion was conducted in English, with the remainder translated from the Tibetan.

Journal of Tibetan Literature: Rabsal la, we know that you had a long and good relationship with your friend Elliot Sperling and we understand that he suggested or maybe requested that you translate *On the Road*. Can you tell us the story of how the translation began?

Gedun Rabsal: Before I answer your question, I would like to draw on some background information. In my younger days in Dharamsala, there was a sense among the Tibetan readers and writers that there was a real need for works in Tibetan translation. Amnye Machen had a project to translate books into Tibetan. Some of the works selected were Gandhi's works, and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and other books as well. When I came to Indiana University, my students wanted me to provide them with reading materials, not classical materials but more contemporary materials like fiction and novels. And there really wasn't much. We had Döndrup Gyal and some things, but I sensed that we needed much more. Especially in terms of children's books, there are books here like the Dr. Seuss books and *Winnie the Pooh* books. And these books are very useful for teaching language. So in 2013, I went to Dharamsala and I sought an audience with His Holiness the 17th Karmapa and I reported such need, and a potential project, with him. And in 2015, His Holiness Karmapa and some of us gathered in Latse Library and from there we set up the 108 Translation Project. That is just some background information.

When I started my teaching career at Indiana University, I was in my thirties and I wanted to learn English more for my work. At that time, there was a friend named Mary Peterson who studied Tibetan language with me, so I was teaching her Tibetan and she was teaching me English. A lifelong high school teacher, she was a superfan of Hemingway. And she was crazy about *The Old Man and the Sea*. I taught her Shantideva's *The Bodhisattva's Way of Life* and she taught me Hemingway. Sometimes it was like an oracle had possessed her, she got that excited about Hemingway.

And so we read Hemingway together, and then I translated *The Old Man and the Sea* after that. At first, I couldn't get the copyright to publish it. So here and there we tried, and then I got in touch with Tenzin Dickie and she managed to get me the copyright. And then *The Old Man and the Sea* was published by *Tibet Times*.

I gave a Tibetan copy to Elliot Sperling, and as soon as he saw that, he came back to me saying, you have to do *On the Road*. Now I didn't have any knowledge of *On the Road* and I also didn't have any interest in it. My main concern then was to finish more of Hemingway because I was familiar with his language now. But Elliot came to me, and he gave me this task for two reasons. One, his journey to Tibetan Studies began because of Kerouac. Because reading Kerouac's *On the Road* pushed Elliot on the road, to Asia, where he ended up meeting with the Tibetans—so his Tibetan Studies journey started like that. Two, another thing was that there's too much reading with classical Tibetan texts. Elliot thought we need texts with more simple readings. Elliot wanted texts with some simple language, texts with more colloquial and spoken language, and he thought a translation of *On the Road* could do that. So that is the reason I ended up translating *On the Road*.

JTL: So when Elliot suggested to you the work of translating *On the Road*, at some point you must have read it for the first time. What was your experience of reading it for the first time?

GR: This is another long story. This was ten years back at least. I don't recall exactly what my experience was at that time but reading an English book as a second language learner, and reading *On the Road* for the first time, I thought there were so many new styles and new vocabulary. What happened is that Elliot promised me he would go over my translation once I had finished it. Between then and now, for all of us who engage in translation work, when we do a translation project, you just have to put yourself into the project. Somebody else cannot lead you to do it, you have to do it. So I took that approach, and I thought that later I would have plenty of time to go over the translation with him. I read the book for the first time, and I prepared the books for myself including making all kind of notes. I read the first edition. I watched the movie. The audio-book was so helpful, because there are many cases where when you read a section of it you don't understand it but when you listen to it you understand. I listened to the story one time, a second time, during walks, during drives, especially on long drives such as to Chicago, etc. It's a long drive and you can listen to the book all the way through. That is the way I studied this book. Now, the emotional part of this translation is that I couldn't offer this translation to Elliot in person. Sorry. [Gets emotional] So it was a long process, it took a long time, and now it's finally come out and he's not here to receive it.

JTL: He would be very proud. I have a different question, it's also a background question, and it's

really about the Beat authors. Kerouac was part of a famous movement and a new generation of American authors and poets who were real models for a new kind of writing in American literature. It was a new moment in American writing when people were really experimenting, trying new things, and it has a lot to do with the specific American context of what was happening at that time in the 1950s. I wonder what you think the genre of Beat literature, and specially *On the Road*, has to offer a Tibetan reading audience. Why is *Lamla* important for Tibetan readers?

GR: That is a question for Sperling. It was his job to explain why *Lamla* is important for Tibetan readers, I think. He thought that *Lamla* could liberate the Tibetan language. He specifically asked me to use colloquial (spoken *phalké, phal skad*) in my translation. Now first of all, I am not an expert in the Beat generation and Beat literature at all, it was my first time hearing about them and I am really naïve in my understanding of these things. Second, as I mentioned earlier, I think my generation's reading of American literature and English literature is more limited. I hear that John Steinbeck changed the language of American literature away from British writing. But that kind of knowledge, when I am reading *On the Road* I am not going to get it. To me, what I notice is that he uses a lot of slang and dirty words. That's it. Now, I think the future Tibetan generation can go deep into what the language of Kerouac has to offer to Tibetans.

As for me, I was looking at the references of Tibet, the references of Buddhism in *On the Road* itself. And as you know Kerouac wrote a lot on Buddhism. *The Dharma Bums* even uses Tibetan terms such as *yab yum*, although I don't know how much he understood it. The foreword to Kerouac's *Life of the Buddha* was written by Professor Bob Thurman and he judged Kerouac's knowledge of Buddhism. He thought Kerouac had a limited knowledge of Buddhism. But anyway, I was looking at Kerouac's Buddhist references. He mentioned Holy Lhasa one time, and he had the reference to countless lives and countless deaths, and those I think we can take as Buddhist theories of things. He talked about emptiness and other Buddhist philosophical ideas in *On the Road*. And when he reached the US and Mexico border at New Laredo, he saw that place as Holy Lhasa. Now the reference to Holy Lhasa doesn't exist in the original 1951 version of *On the Road*, but only in the 1957 printed version, so I think he studied Buddhism during those years in between. And in *The Dharma Bums*, there are a lot of references to Tibet. Did I answer your question, right?

JTL: It sounds like, you suspect this work is important to Tibetan readers because of its engagement of Buddhist ideas. Is there something about life on the road as an act itself? Is something about story telling itself important? Something beyond the Buddhist aspects?

GR: As I mentioned to you before, I don't know much about *On the Road*. I don't see or know any urgent needs of Tibetan translation of this book. However, as I mentioned earlier, this translation project happened because of Elliot Sperling, because Elliot thought that *On the Road* could liber-

ate Tibetan or that it could bring Tibetan to a new level in terms of the novel. That is the reason for this translation.

On the Road goes from New York to Chicago, to Denver, through Arizona to San Francisco, and concerns what they did, what he saw, who he met, what they talked about, what they drank etc. In terms of format, Tibet has that kind of literature—Milarepa, for instance. The *Life of Milarepa* and the *Songs of Milarepa* are about Milarepa on the road, traveling from Gungthang to Lhodrak. And these are very close to *lamyik (lam yig)*, the tour guides, such as Katok Situ's *Ütsang lamyik*, which tracks his travels to Lhasa and Samyé, etc.

But in terms of content, that was not the point of me translating or of Latse undertaking this project. We are not interested in bringing new content or new subjects into the Tibetan language per se; we are just interested in giving Tibetan readers more resources to read. That is our goal.

Years ago, I was a language teacher in a Tibetan Children's Village school in Dharamsala for a year and my job was to teach Tibetan language to Tibetans who didn't know how to read Tibetan. And one student came to me and said, "Genla, when I hear *Kungao, Kungao, Kungao* ["Ānanda"], I get bored!" She didn't want to read Buddhist literature or she was just interested in something new in Tibetan. So providing Tibetan readers an alternate text can promote Tibetan language greatly.

JTL: Following that question, Elliot asked you to use *phelké* in your translation and you did it. Can you talk more about that?

GR: One time, in a conference in Denver, Dr. Lama Jabb did a presentation on Tibetan repetitive words such as *gang mang mang* and *gang nyung nyung*. I tried to pay attention to that in my translation, to the music of the Tibetan language, to the usages of the adjectives.

In terms of the language and bringing more spoken into the written, in some parts I really intentionally tried to do this. For the cowboy dialogue in *On the Road*, I tried to match it with the way Khampas or nomads may speak. And the language of Southern aristocrats, that I tried to convey using the Lhasa dialect.

Now the big question is, is my attempt there in the final version? No, no it isn't. My editors had a heavy hand in the final manuscript. Many people helped me with the book. When I was working on it, I placed the English and Tibetan side by side in the manuscript. I read it again and again, and I used color codes on the manuscript. Red meant I must ask a native speaker about this passage. Yellow, blue, etc.—I had color coded the text, and after that, I had meetings with others. I asked most of my questions to Kristina Dy-Liacco, who was very helpful. I also spent much time with Dr. Nancy Lin, and Jim Canary and Dr. Jerry Jesseph, who were all very helpful. After that I took all the English out, and left the Tibetan alone, and I submitted the text to Pema Tsewang Shastri and Dhondup Tashi Rekjong; the two of them edited the Tibetan translation. There was

also a Tibetan translator in Chengdu, who edited the text as well. Gen Pema Bhum and Tenzin Gelek also edited it. So, because the translation passed through all these different people, I don't know if the language I used is still there!

JTL: As part of the translation process, you undertook a cross-country journey following in the footsteps of Kerouac in *On the Road*. Why was this important for you? What did it add to your work of translation?

GR: After I translated the book, I really wanted to see America. Also, I was translating part of the book during the pandemic and during the pandemic we couldn't go anywhere. So afterwards, because the book was all about America, I wanted to see it! Reading about the travels in *On the Road* made me want to get on the road. So I went down to Virginia Beach, saw the ocean, and then went to DC and picked up Shingza Rinpoché, the head lama of Ragya Monastery, and then we traveled together. First we went to Tennessee, then Arkansas, then Oklahoma, and New Mexico after that. And after that it was Arizona, then we entered Utah, then Idaho and Wyoming. And the landscape over there, especially in Wyoming, was so much like Tibet—it's rivers and mountains, forests and water, and even the flowers are like Tibetan flowers. In the valleys there were trees just like the trees in my hometown, Rebkong. From Montana to Iowa, then we came down to Illinois and Michigan and West Virginia.

I realized that in the south and in the east, America is more or less flat. Then as you go west, as you pass through Virginia and so on, the forests grow tall and the grass grows tall, and then as you continue, the trees get smaller and smaller until eventually they disappear. In Oklahoma, there was so much fir and juniper though. In Arizona and New Mexico, you will see the red soil, and as you continue, then you start to see fir and juniper trees. It was useful to see all this. It was useful to see the geography with my own eyes.

For example, Iowa is long and rectangular and has the Mississippi river on one end and the Missouri river on the other end. Kerouac has many descriptions of these rivers, and it was useful to actually see them. I have another example: on my travels, I was able to identify a grass, sage-grass, that Kerouac talks about. I was consulting dictionaries and I had been phonetizing "sage" in the Tibetan translation. But going over there and seeing it, I realize, it's sage, it's *khanpa*! We have *ganden khanpa*, white *khanpa*, black *khanpa*—the difference is that ours is more like grass, and here it's a mix, some of the sage here even have branches. This kind of identification was very helpful, and especially seeing the geography of America with my own eyes.

JTL: You have written a memoir in which you describe how you yourself undertook a major journey to India from Tibet into exile in 1987. Did that experience (either the travel or the writing about it) influence or inspire your work on *On the Road*?

GR: To me these works are different. So I don't know how to answer that or what kind of influence there was, but maybe you are right, maybe that did inspire something.

When I wrote *Let's Go Into Exile*, I was thinking, how can I best tell this story? What was I worried about, what was I not worried about, what did I do when I had anxiety and worries on the road, that's what I needed to tell the reader. When translating *On the Road*, I was just thinking about the choice of words, of vocabulary.

Reading a text and translating a text are totally different experiences. I was inputting a *namthar* [biography] into the computer and I had to be careful about even a *tseg* [the interpunct], and be so mindful of the spelling and all that. Afterwards as I was thinking about the *namthar*, I realized not much of it has remained in my mind. It's not like when you are reading, and your overall understanding of the book is very clear in your mind. Translation is the same, every comma, every capitalized word, every quotation word, every dot, every detail—I have to pay minute attention. So that after the translation is finished, there's almost a state where, if you ask me what is in *On the Road*, I almost have to think about it.

When I am writing I have ideas that I am putting down on the page. When I am translating, I don't have my own ideas in my mind, I just have vocabulary in my mind. There is also certain vocabulary that the author coined. You will notice it when you are translating it. I encountered such cases in both *On the Road* and in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. I came across a word that the author has just made up, this word actually did not exist in English language, and it's likely you won't notice this while you are just reading the book, only when you are translating it.

JTL: Speaking of new words that authors made up, Kerouac and other Beat authors were experimenting with new kinds of language and new modes of narrative and expression. What was it like to render this in Tibetan? Did you need to invent new terms or neologisms?

GR: Now for these new words that the author made up, which I have to put into Tibetan, that was not a problem. For example, in *On the Road*, one word invented by the author is “dingledodies.” Because we know what the author meant, and so I ended up using an existing Tibetan word that is similar to the meaning of this word.

For English, there are so many resources in English, dictionaries of course, and all kinds of online resources. There are many online resources for *On the Road* as a classic text. Say for example, that the protagonists Dean and Sal went from one place to another, they went to a restaurant, or they ate a meal. Now when there's a problem there, if you don't know what a word is, you can find out and then the problem is solved. But where there are ideas or concepts, then it's very hard. For instance, when Sal goes with Dean to Chicago and then ends up in Detroit, he has no place to sleep so he sleeps in a movie theater...and as he's watching the movie, he gets all mixed up in his mind. Now he's talking to people inside the movie, now it's as if he were in a previous life,

so when it's like that, translating that state of mind, then it's difficult. Ideas are hard, conceptual descriptions are hard.

Language about music, for instance, is very difficult to translate. Tibet didn't have many words to do with musical notation—so how to translate that? The word “blow,” that was very challenging. To blow a trumpet, to beat the drums, these were difficult.

In *On the Road*, they were looking for something, but what was this thing they were searching for? They just called it “IT”—they said, “he got it, we are going to get it.” If we want to really find out what “it” means, it seems to be nirvana or enlightenment or some great bliss, so these were difficult to translate. English has so many nouns, so many objects, and many many words with so many meanings. For instance, the word “wild” as in wild animal, wild street, wild market, wild music—am I able to render that into Tibetan according to its different context? Another word, “kick”—the book says, he got kicks, we will have kicks. Now what does that mean? It's used sometimes as a verb and sometimes as a noun. It's a difficult thing, translating the full meaning of the English word into the Tibetan.

And “the Beat generation”—how to translate that fully into Tibetan? It's not possible! Kerouac's word “beat” has so many meanings—heartbeat, drumbeat, I am beat up, I am down, upbeat—all of these as well as the “beat” of the Christian “beatific.” There's no way that a word can somehow contain all these different meanings in Tibetan. The word I used for “beat” at first was *pham dung*, a neologism if we had ended up using it, incorporating the *pham* of defeat and *dung* of beating the drum. But I had a lot of debate back and forth with my editors, and we debated and debated, and I lost. So now it's just *pham pa*, and I just put a note in the book with a detailed explanation of the term. When you are translating from one language to another, there's only so much you can do. You can't get everything fully into Tibetan. Now the word for “generation”—in Tibetan, the word *mi rab* does not really refer to a group of people, only to an actual generation. Also the word “beat” has had different translations in Tibetan. One problem we Tibetans have is the problem of standardization. We cannot standardize. As we are translating so many new words into Tibetan, as we need lots of new terms, every translator uses their own word and has their own reasons for that usage. Well, as time goes on, some of these new words and usages will stick and others won't. Time will tell.

JTL: Can you talk about translating the title? Kerouac's title *On the Road* seems to suggest a journey, or even a way of being in the world. How did you come to translate this as *Lam la* (which could also be construed as *In the Road*).

GR: First, the way Tibetan books are titled and the way books in English are titled is very different. For instance, modern Tibetan titles look like this: *The Frost Bitten Flower*, *The Waterfall of Youth*, *The Heartbeat of a New Generation*. It's all nouns, you don't see prepositions. *In the Road*, *Off the*

Road, On the Road—that’s not how Tibetan titles work. And trust me, I thought about this. If it took me ten years to translate *On the Road*, during those ten years I thought about the translation of the title. How do I translate *On the Road*? I tried different things. *Lam* (*grul bzhud*). *Lam la kyod pa*. *Lam*, just *Lam* by itself. Life on the Road. *Lam La* and *Lam Du*. Linguistically, grammatically, they are just the same. But really, when you think about it, *Lam Du*, that is literally *On the Road*. So there were all these different options, and after considering all of them, the title I selected was *Lam La*. Well part of the reason why is that this book is not a Tibetan book, it’s an American book, and its foreignness is part of this book so I wanted to convey that in the title. Besides that, *Lam La* is easy to say, it’s easy to spell, it’s a nice title that rolls off the tongue. And it conveys the meaning. Now this title would never otherwise exist in Tibetan, a Tibetan book would never be called *Lam La*. But it’s not a Tibetan book. Look at *Seven Years in Tibet*; Tibetan titles don’t work like that. It should be *Bod Nang Lo Dun Dé Pa*, *Living in Tibet for Seven Years*, but again that is a foreign book so the translated title *Bod Nang Lo Dun* makes sense.

JTL: How was translating Kerouac’s *On the Road* different from translating Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*? These were such different books.

GR: Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* was short, and Kerouac’s *On the Road* was very long! In terms of the linguistic differences between *The Old Man and the Sea* and *On the Road*, to tell the truth I really can’t tell the differences. Now when you ask me about the writings of the Fifth Dalai Lama or the writings of Tsongkhapa, that’s easy for me to say. There’s something lacking in our understanding of English literature that is very hard to overcome. You really need to have English as a working language—you live by it, you die by it—that’s what you need. Now the way I began translation, I can’t really say it’s a choice. I mean of course I chose to translate but I was almost pushed into it by the situation.

Anyway for Hemingway, after I translated *The Old Man and the Sea*, we printed several different editions of it, so each time I edited it completely. The very first time I was editing after translating it, I was just focused on accuracy. But the later times when I was looking at it, I was just looking at readability. The structure of English is the subject + verb + object structure, and anything you say, that’s the structure. In Tibetan, perhaps in fifty percent of the cases, the subject is implied but not explicit. Someone says they went to Tibet and what did they do there? Not much, there wasn’t much to do but they ate some momos and that was it. In Tibetan, it’s not explicit but rather just understood who went to Lhasa and ate the momos. Now when you take the subject + verb + object structure and translate it like that, it doesn’t read well in Tibetan at all.

“My key is on my desk near my computer beside my book.” That’s a perfectly normal sentence in English. Now if you tried to say that in Tibetan, it’s got way too many “me” and “my;” it just

sounds totally wrong. So you know, the Hemingway, I edited once, then I edited again and again. As for *On the Road*, others edited it, and I was on the receiving end of their edits. Of course I had the final say but often I chose to accept their edits.

JTL: How much did you think of yourself translating ideas, or a world, beyond the words and sentences? Are these ideas important for Tibetans?

GR: My job is not to judge the book; my job is to carry the message into Tibetan language. But of course, the ideas are important. Every comma is important and has to be delivered properly into Tibetan. In the same way, the ideas were important and needed to be delivered properly into Tibetan.

There are many concepts or ideas that might be interesting to Tibetan readers. Now there's a quote from *On the Road*, "Anonymity in the world of men is better than fame in heaven, for what's heaven? What's earth? All in the mind." Now this "all in the mind" has to do with Buddhist philosophy, I think. There are these four schools of Buddhist philosophy, which are Vaibhashika, Sautrantika, Chittamatra, and Madhyamaka. The Chittatmatra is the mind-only school, and this line of Kerouac's seems to reference the philosophy of the mind only school. Now that's interesting and relevant to Tibetans. He also talks about the princes of dharma and he wrote *Life of the Buddha*—these are all very relevant to Tibetans.

There's also a line about being in a high place somewhere and meditating before in a previous life. Now this is the first time that *On the Road* has been translated into Tibetan. Kerouac died when he was young, quite young, and he had actually studied a lot of Buddhism. He had read many texts. He read Milarepa's biography, Marpa's biography—he wrote the *Life of the Buddha*. He read a lot of Buddhist works, he read the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Lankvatarasutra*, and most importantly, the *Dhammapada*—that Gendun Chopel translated into Tibetan. And I think that we can see the influence of all these texts in *On the Road*.

There's a place where Kerouac's talking about a madman who is building a house. And he wants another house built by the side and he calls the contractors and construction workers and makes them build this house, and then after this house is finished, he doesn't like it and wants it demolished. Now what does this remind us of? If Kerouac were alive, we could ask him if he was indeed referencing Milarepa's trial by Marpa. But we don't know! So we can't really say. I have read reviews where people really emphasize that Kerouac is a Christian writer, that his religion is Christianity. Whether he's Christian or Buddhist, I don't know and it doesn't matter to me, I don't need to say that he is Buddhist.

JTL: What was your training in Tibetan literature? Where and when did you get this training?

GR: This is a long story, but I will try to tell it as briefly as possible. When I was living in a monastery in Tibet, this was in the 1980s. Ten years before, there wasn't much Tibetan studies going on at all. In 1976, Chairman Mao died, and then Tibetans were allowed to study Buddhism. And all of a sudden, there was a big interest in the Tibetan language, everyone was very interested in studying Tibetan and studying Buddhism. And we began to learn grammar and spelling—for example, the spelling manual *Wingbeats of the Butterfly*, we just memorized all of it. And we also studied Buddhist philosophy in the monastery. My teacher always liked to say, don't hold on to the branch while letting go of the root. They meant that we mustn't get so interested in poetry and the arts that we forget to study Buddhism! With my teacher, I studied literature and poetry. Tseten Shabdrung was very famous then, and I read Tseten Shabdrung's works such as *Instructions of Thonmi on Grammar* at that time.

By the time I came to India, my Tibetan was pretty good. In India, I had a job at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Varanasi where I was a research fellow. My research project then was to write about the history of Tibetan literature. And that's how I really began to look into the Kangyur and Tengyur and the collected works of the Buddhist masters, in order to study the influence of *kavya* on specific texts. Before the translation of the *Mirror of Poetry* came to Tibet, we did have figures of speech, what in Sanskrit is called *alamkara* or "figures of speech." Tibet had so many scholars and writers. What do we see in their writings? What figures of speech do we see in Sakya Pandita's writings? What figures of speech in Drogön Chögyal Phakpa's (1235–1280) writings, and in his writings there were so many. Of course, these were both written before the translation of the *Mirror of Poetry*. And later there were so many other examples, especially during Jé Tsongkhapa's time, so many that we can't even count them. So I was just taking samples and looking at them and studying them. That's my brief history of the study of figures of speech in Tibetan literature.

Before I used to really like writing poetry, like many of my generation. But as I read and studied, I willingly became someone who observed poetry rather than someone who wrote poetry. There were so many who were writing, and I didn't want to write like them. And at the same time, I couldn't write anything different from them!

JTL: You have extensive training in *nyen ngak* (*snyan ngag*), *kavya*, or "ornate poetry." When you read Tibetan literature, either poetry or prose, do you bring ways of reading and interpretation from your training in *kavya*? How does *kavya* theory influence your reading and interpretation of non-*kavya* Tibetan literature?

GR: That's a really open question. I can say anything, I think. On the one hand, it had everything to do with it. Now even when I read a biography, I can see the *kavya* applications everywhere. Pro-

fessor Nicole Willock and I worked on something together on this subject, and it concerns Lot-sawa Chenpo Chengchub Tsemo. Lochen Jangchub Tsemo and Tselpa Kunga Dorjé, the author of *The Red Annals*, were contemporaries, and this was during Phagmodrupa's time. Now Jangchub Tsemo came to Lhasa quietly, visited the Potala and Jokhang and then left Lhasa. Tselpa Kunga Dorje wanted to meet him, but Jangchub Tsemo just came and went! So Tselpa Kunga Dorje has this one very poetic and pithy verse: “*phebs ma thag tu phebs zhes bdag la sbron*” meaning “As soon as you arrived, you left.” “*Phep ma thag*” means as soon as you arrived, and “*pheb*” means you left. So you see, even when I am reading *namthar*, I can see the usage of *kavya*.

Is ornate poetry translatable or not translatable? It's a very important question. The sense of art in the poetry, can you translate that into another language? Take a look at *Jatakamala*. Its characteristic wordplay in Sanskrit, which is called *shabda alamkara*, can be rendered into Tibetan. But can the wordplay from the Tibetan or Sanskrit be rendered into English? I think it's very difficult. Maybe you can try, but I think there's no right or wrong answer. You can translate something from one language into another, but your readers can understand it very differently.

There's a line in the scriptures: The Buddha said that sound is impermanent. Some people understood that to mean that sound is empty, and others understood it to mean that sound is not permanent. Now which is it? Which interpretation is right? I guess it's art.

JTL: Did going deep into Beat literature change your thoughts and feelings about any examples or ideas in Tibetan literature?

GR: I don't know how to answer this question. This question is too deep for me. Because I don't know much about Beat literature, the only thing I translated is *On the Road*.

Quite frankly, I tried to read Kerouac's poetry, his *Book of Haikus*. I don't understand it. When you read his book of haikus, this is a random line:

Cloudy autumn night
—cold water drips
in the sink.

This is what it sounds like in Tibetan:

ལྗང་པས་གཡོགས་པའི་སྟོན་གྱི་མཚན་མོ་ཞིག་ལ།
ཚུ་གང་མོའི་ཐིགས་པ་འཇགས།
ལྷན་གཞིང་ནང་ལ།
[laughs]

JTL: What about translating *On the Road*? Did that change anything about the way that you look at Tibetan literature?

GR: That may be a really good question. I don't know, I really don't know. I tried to compare *On the Road* with texts in Tibetan literature. I tried to compare it to biographies, I tried to compare it with the *lamyik* guidebook genre. Did it change my way of thinking about Tibetan literature? I didn't have any eye-opening idea about it.

The crazy part is that *On the Road* was such a great success, to the point that it changed a generation. It changed people, like it changed Sperling. That kind of narrative success and narrative influence, can it occur in Tibet? I don't know. Maybe a book that we can think of is *Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler* by Gendun Chöphel. That book got me interested in learning languages, especially Indian languages; it made me want to learn the details of those languages. That was *Grains of Gold's* influence on me. What other text has such an influence? There is Döndrup Gyal, who's very influential. People talk about him a lot.

But maybe we Tibetans don't have such narratives, maybe we just have too much Buddhism, and too much "Om Mani Padme Hum." So we don't have a book that can change a man's life, a man's view. Because I think the Tibetan mind is already formed in a box, and it's not ready to change. For instance, if you look at *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, it teaches us: If you can fix it, why do you worry? If you cannot fix it, what can worry do? That kind of logic and narrative, you can apply that anywhere, and that validation is so strong. Don't you think so?

JTL: What should Tibetans read in their own literature to better appreciate *On the Road*? And what should English-reading audiences read in Tibetan literature if they are interested in *On the Road*? Are there works of Tibetan literature that you think would pair well with *On the Road*?

GR: Some parts of these questions, I already answered, I think. In *On the Road* there are some parts that I really love. For instance, the part where he goes to Mexico, I love that part. Sal is in Denver and Dean is in New York, and all of a sudden, he learns that Dean is coming. And there's a vision of Dean—his car is roaring, there's a tempest of clouds, behind him, the road is on fire—it's such a clear description. And, just for example, we can see that same clarity of description in Milarepa's biography too. When Milarepa's mother sends him to learn black magic, he goes and gets drunk instead. When his mother sees him drunk and singing, she gets so angry that she beats her *chupa*, and holding a spatula in her hand, she comes roaring towards him. The text says, she jumps on the longer steps and runs on the shorter steps, and this scene is laid out so well that you can see the scene so clearly.

In the first chapter, there's a story of him and a Mexican girl, and I really love that too. Overall, perhaps he has a loyalty to his own people but he also has a deep respect for other people. As for

Black people, he says he wishes he were a Black man, that he is sick and tired of being white. Take his love for music and for musicians, mostly Black musicians, like Charlie Parker and the jazz musicians. In San Francisco, when he and his friend Dean go to a bar, Dean sees a musician as a “god.” These examples show there’s much in the book that’s important for Tibetans, and I think Tibetans can understand it right away.

JTL: What has been the Tibetan response to *Lamla*?

GR: The answer to this question is a bit complicated. Now when *Lamla* came out, non-Tibetans said *Tashi Delek*, congratulations, and told me that it’s a big accomplishment. Among Tibetans, the first thing they point out is what is wrong with the book. During the event launching the book, I heard the title of *Lamla* is not quite right. On Facebook, the first response is that the translation of the term “Beat generation” is wrong, and the second is that the translation of the title *Lamla* is wrong.

Our book culture and western book culture—the reading of books and using books as a source of education—is quite different. In English, I know that people write reviews, they read the books, they congratulate the author, but it’s all done according to a set timeline. When someone first opens the book, they congratulate the writer. When they open it next, they read it. When they open it a third time, they review it. And the review has both positive notes and negative notes. But it’s a natural process. For the Tibetan audience, I don’t think it’s like that. That’s the difference between the English speaking world and the Tibetan speaking world. In the Tibetan world, the very first time they read something, they want to criticize it right away. And there are two reasons. The first is that people want a platform to show that they know something. The second is that if they want to make a valid criticism, then it’s very useful and helpful. And that process takes time. But they don’t take that time. And the third is that Tibetans have an assumed reality, and the assumption that they have is that the Kangyur and the Tengyur translations are the most perfect translations of all time. And anytime any new translation comes out, they compare it to the translation of the Tibetan canon. And the translation of the canon is perfect, that’s just assumed.

Now Marpa spent twenty one years in India. His language skills are expert, and his translation is perfect. But there are other translators of the canon who barely speak any Sanskrit. Nobody so far has done the research on their comprehension, on how much some of these weaker translators understood or not. If you take the case of *The Life of Buddha*, the *Buddhacarita*, the translator spent a couple of years in Nepal and did the translation. Now the *Buddhacarita*, which is such a famous classic poem and a great Buddhist literary work, never gained any reputation in Tibet because of its poor translation. Rather, in Tibet it was *The Bodhisattvavadanakalpalata* by Kashmir Pandita Ksemendra that became the beloved classic. Why? Because its translator was highly expert in

kavya and in languages. And Tibetan readers don't know that, for instance, in the Kangyur and Tengyur, some Indian translators who barely knew Tibetan have made Tibetan translations.

When TCV students say "male yak" and "female yak," they are made fun of, but did you know that in Atisha's translation, he wrote about "male sheep" and "female sheep," "male horse" and "female horse," and no one makes fun of that? Instead people just prostrate at the feet of Atisha. Anyway what I mean to say is that there are there poor translations in the Kanygur and Tengyur but people don't see that way. We just think it was all perfect. Anyway, I don't need someone to read this and say it's great. What I hope is that someone will read it and try to understand this American Beat generation and to read some Tibetan!

JTL: Do you have any advice for translators of Tibetan-language literature into English?

GR: I was just asked that question recently. This happens a lot with Tibetans. Older people give advice to younger people and give them guidance. I don't think this is the right approach, at least for me. I don't have anything to say except work hard, do your job, spend your time. I do want to make this note. I really want to credit the contributors who helped me with *On the Road*, who helped read my manuscript, who helped me understand paragraphs and problems. There were a lot of people who spent time and attention on it. It's not only my work, it's many people's work. So that's the main point. I don't know if this is advice, but this is my take. You do not need a perfect translation. You should just try to deliver the message your own way, and you get plus points if you can go through the Tibetan translation rules, regulations, and norms that were set out in the 8th century and later on. If you can do that, that's wonderful! Just follow that. Unlike other languages, Tibetan has a whole set of rules and regulations, of translation theories and translation studies. We have plenty of that. If you can follow that, it's great. Otherwise, well, mistakes happen. You can't ignore mistakes, that's for sure. You should try to avoid mistakes but don't be afraid of making mistakes. If you are afraid of making mistakes, then you are not going to do anything.

You have to understand, what I am trying to do, what is right for my generation—it's not necessarily right for the younger generation. We are just trying to create reader materials. The younger generation may have other things to do to make Tibetan literature more beautiful, more poetic, more readable, and more likeable, including putting space between the words!

When you go to do anything, there's not just one challenge but there's a hundred thousand challenges and there's a hundred thousand solutions, and one person's solution may be right for one person but not for another. And for *On the Road*, there were different solutions for each problem. The most important thing is, you have to do something. You have to do something. If you don't, then you are not doing your duty. No matter what, you have to do something.

JTL: What are you working on now?

GR: When I was at Varanasi, I was young, energetic and arrogant. I was writing a history of Tibetan literature. And one thing I did good work on was the period of the early dissemination and the works produced then, such as the Kangyur and the Tengyur, and the *Lhenkarma Catalog* (also known as the *Denkarma Catalog*). I also studied Sakya Pandita very well. But I didn't do enough research on the period between Sakya Pandita and Jé Tsongkhapa, which is a two hundred year period. It's the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, going into the fifteenth century, this period I didn't cover well. Actually I wrote a book covering the thirteenth century. When we talk about the five minor sciences which includes grammar, poetry, and composition, Sakya Pandita initiated their study, he started it all. Sakya Pandita's generation, and Shongtön Dorjé Gyaltsen and Pang Lotsawa who were in the generation after him—these were the generations I previously covered.

Now I am covering the next generation: Pang Lotsawa's nephew Lotsawa Jangchup Tsemo, Sakya Lama Dampa Sönam Gyaltsen, also Longchen Rabjampa, Gyalsé Thokmé Sangpo, etc. What work have they done for Tibetan grammar, poetry, composition and literature? After them comes the generation of Jé Tsongkhapa. So that's what I am writing a book about. Basically, I am tracing the lineage of the *Mirror of Poetry*.

I am a little tired of translating now. When you are translating, you are in a box. When you are writing you have so much freedom! You can write whatever you want. Before I wrote an essay on each person, an essay on Pang Lotsawa, an essay on Shongtön Dorjé Gyaltsen, an essay on Drogön Chögyal Phakpa. Now I am thinking maybe I should just do a line on each subject. So that's my ongoing project. And after this I am going to Amdo, I mean, in terms of study. I am going to study the lamas of Rebkong.

Transcribed and partially translated by Tenzin Dickie. The contents of this interview have been lightly edited for style and clarity.

