

# Incomparable Guide

Khenpo Kalsang Dhondup

Translated by Khenpo Kalsang Dhondup and Patrick Dowd

## Incomparable Guide

With the medicine of selflessness,  
you cured those tormented  
with the illness of self-grasping.

By offering rest to benefit others,  
you released those oppressed  
by the burden of self-interest.

With the spacious relaxation of non-duality,  
you liberated those bounded  
by the chains of the dualistic appearance.

Through your teachings on interdependence,  
you offered respite to those  
enslaved by concepts of god and creator.

With the sword that understands insubstantiality,  
you severed the rope  
that fixates on true existence.

With the light of wisdom,  
you offered luminous vision to those  
who wander in the darkness of delusion.

With your hands embracing wisdom and method,  
you seized and protected those  
mired into the mud of *samsāra*.

With my body, speech and mind,  
I prostrate to the Buddha Śākyamuni,  
Incomparable Guide.

སྟོན་པ་མཚུངས་མེད།

བདག་འཛིན་ནད་གྱིས་གཟིར་བ་ལ།  
བདག་མེད་སྐྱེན་གྱིས་གསོས་པར་མཛད།

རང་དོན་ཁུར་གྱིས་ཅོན་པ་ལ།  
གཞན་དོན་རལ་གསོའི་སྤྲེགས་བྱ་གནང་།

གཉིས་སྤང་སྐྱོག་གིས་བཅིངས་བ་ལ།  
གཉིས་མེད་སྟོང་པའི་སྐྱོད་གོལ་བཏང་།

ལྷ་དང་བྱེད་པོས་བཀོལ་སྦྱོད་ལ།  
ཉིན་འབྱུང་གཏམ་གྱིས་གུང་གསེང་བཏང་།

བདེན་ཞེན་མགོ་བོའི་སྐྱ་ཐག་ལ།  
བདེན་མེད་རལ་གྱིས་དུམ་བུར་བྱས།

ཚོངས་པའི་སྐྱག་ཏུ་འབྲམ་པ་ལ།  
ཤེས་རབ་གསལ་བའི་འོད་སྤང་བྱིན།

འཁོར་བའི་འདམ་དུ་བྱིང་བ་ལ།  
ཐབས་ཤེས་ཕྱག་རྒྱུང་རིང་མོ་བསྐྱུངས།

སྟོན་པ་མཚུངས་མེད་ཤཀ་བྱུབ་ལ།  
སྟོ་གསུམ་གྱས་པས་ཕྱག་བཞུའོ།

མཁན་པོ་སྐལ་བཟང་དོན་གྱུབ་གྱིས་ཚོམ།

# Translator's Commentary

by Patrick Dowd

In his poem “Incomparable Guide” (*ston pa mtshungs med*), Khenpo Kalsang Dhondup (Mkhan po Skal bzang don grub) brings a modern, almost scientific, perspective to the traditional Indo-Tibetan genre of “hymns of praise,” or *töpa*, (Tib. *bstod pa*, Skt. *stotra*). While readers of Tibetan literature will immediately recognize the poem as *töpa*, we nonetheless see a range of influences reflective of the poet's unique background: a classically educated monastic scholar with deep interest in the role of the Buddhist teachings for contemporary people.

As a genre, hymns of praise may date as far back as the sixth century BCE.<sup>1</sup> The *Tengyur* (*bstan gyur*) contains scores of hymns of praise to the Buddha and other Buddhist deities, which comprise the first section of the collection as edited and arranged by the scholar Butön Rinchen Drup (Bu ston rin chen grub, 1290–1364) in the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Like other genres in Tibetan literature, hymns of praise are generally defined by their subject matter rather than their strict adherence to a specific form,<sup>3</sup> though they must be written in verse rather than prose. The genre of praise became a major source of inspiration for countless indigenous Tibetan compositions, with masters of all lineages, such as Jigten Sumgön (Jigs bstan gsum mgon, 1143–1217), Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419), and Longchen Rabjam (Klong chen rab 'byams, 1308–64), all writing *töpa* to various deities and Buddhist teachers. Nāgārjuna composed perhaps the most famous “Collection of Praises” (Tib. *bstod tshogs*, Skt. *stotragāṇa*) in the canon of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist literature, which includes his important *In Praise of the Twelve Deeds* (Tib. *Mdzad pa bcu gnyis kyī tshul la bstod pa*, Skt. *Dvādaśakāra-nāma-stotra*), a work frequently recited by Tibetans in translation during major Buddhist holidays, extolling the virtuous actions of Buddha Śākyamuni.

Nāgārjuna's *Twelve Deeds* serves as a helpful foil to what may initially appear to be Khenpo Kalsang's more secularly minded poem. Unlike Nāgārjuna's famous work, which depicts the Buddha “[d]escending from the god realm like a great elephant”<sup>4</sup> to spread the Dharma on earth, Khenpo Kalsang's poem excludes any such overtly miraculous behavior. This does not reflect divergent belief systems—Khenpo Kalsang does not evaluate the Buddha's life story with the skepticism of

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1. Nayar 1992, 15–16.

2. Cabezón and Jackson 1987, 22–23.

3. Cabezón and Jackson 1987, 20–26.

4. Gaffney and Pearcey 2016.

a scientific materialist—but rather different points of emphasis. The poet stated that he wrote this work on the occasion of Lhabab Düchen (*Iha babs dus chen*),<sup>5</sup> the “Festival of the Descent from Heaven,” one of four major Tibetan Buddhist holidays commemorating the life of the Buddha. Lhabab Düchen celebrates the Buddha’s descent back to earth from Trāyastriṃśa Heaven (*sum cu rtsa gsum*), after he taught the Dharma to his deceased mother, Māyādevī, and thereby forever freed her from *samsāra*. As the effects of all actions, positive or negative, are said to be multiplied ten million times on this auspicious holiday,<sup>6</sup> Khenpo Kalsang composed this poem while contemplating the particular, unique qualities (*khyad chos*) of the Buddha’s teachings.<sup>7</sup> He concluded that the Buddha’s wisdom, which, like a sword “sever[s] the rope/ that fixates on true existence,” is a far greater miracle than even a descent from the heavenly realms. The Buddha’s paramount achievement consists of his profound realization, which frees “those/ enslaved by concepts of god and creator” and offers them instead the “medicine of selflessness,” “teachings on interdependence,” and “light of wisdom.” Khenpo Kalsang’s poem remains a “hymn of praise,” but contrary to its title, one that is directed principally at the nature of the teachings rather than the “Incomparable Guide” himself.

The poem demonstrates a classically trained monastic scholar breathing new life into an ancient genre, employing a traditional thematic form to explore the perspectives of a 21<sup>st</sup> century person to the Buddha’s teachings. This mixing of a classical theme and form with a certain modern sensibility reflects Khenpo Kalsang’s educational background, which blends a traditional Tibetan Buddhist training with the considerations and sensibilities of a contemporary Buddhist. Kalsang was born in 1988 in Kham, in the region of Tréwo Drakgo (*tre bo brag mgo*), incorporated into the present-day Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province. His Buddhist education began at Larung Gar, where he took novice ordination vows at the young age of nine. After his initial years at Larung Gar, spent developing Tibetan literacy and memorizing foundational Tibetan Buddhist texts, he had the great fortune to spend three years receiving Dharma teachings from His Holiness Khenpo Jigmé Puntsok (Mkhan po ’Jigs med phun tshogs, 1933–2004). Following the passing of the great teacher, Kalsang fled to India in 2005 at age seventeen and enrolled in Namdröling Monastery’s *shedra* (*bshad grwa*, a monastic school for studying Buddhist texts) in February 2006. After he completed the rigorous, traditional nine-year course of study, he graduated with the title of Lopön in 2014, and spent the next several years teaching Buddhist scriptures

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5. Khenpo Kalsang Dhondup, in discussion with author, April 24, 2023.

6. Samye Institute 2022.

7. Khenpo Kalsang Dhondup, in discussion with author, April 24, 2023.

at other Nyingma *shedras* in the Tibetan diaspora, first at Dzogchen Monastery, in Karnataka, South India, and later at Azom Monastery, outside of Kathmandu, Nepal.

After he completed his study and teaching obligations for Namdröling, he began a period of concentrated study of English, reflected in part in the present translation. He attended a one-year English language program at the Dalai Lama Institute in Bengaluru, Karnataka, South India in 2021, and enrolled the following year in the English for Dharma Purposes (EDP) program of the Sarnath International Nyingma Institute (SINI). SINI's unique, three-year long EDP program offers a customized English language curriculum for high degree holding Tibetan monastics, with the aspiration they will later share their prodigious Buddhist knowledge to English-speaking audiences. Though relatively new to English, Kalsang already has a strong understanding of the language and a deep interest in both Tibetan-to-English and English-to-Tibetan translation, reflected in our collaboration on the present translation.

At several points in our friendship, Khenpo Kalsang has expressed appreciation for the breadth of information English makes available to him. Through SINI, he has participated in a number of seminar discussions on Zoom with students at Harvard Divinity School and Brandeis University, further exposing him to the skepticism that some Westerners bring to their study of religion, including Buddhism. Such a constellation of factors likely contributed the content of the present poem, where he uses the classic genre of *töpa* to express a contemporary perspective on the emancipating wisdom of the Buddha. In “Incomparable Guide,” the Buddha is not a preacher of religious doctrine, but rather a supreme liberator freeing those “enslaved by concepts of god and creator.”

In terms of poetic form, Khenpo Kalsang breaks from a long Tibetan tradition of writing in quatrains (*tshig rkang bzhi*) and instead writes in couplets (*tshig rkang gnyis*). Even when composing poems with apparently coherent couplets, Tibetan poets have often arranged their verse in quatrains due to the prominence of the four-line *śloka*, the form used in nearly all versified treatises and works of Sanskrit and Chinese verse translated into Classical Tibetan.<sup>8</sup> Khenpo Kalsang's deliberate line break after every couplet thus marks a literary innovation and suggests influence from the *chetsom sarma* (*bcad rtsom gsar ma*), or “new verse,” in contemporary Tibetan poetry, as exemplified by poets such as Sangdhor.<sup>9</sup> Like the work of Sangdhor, Khenpo Kalsang's poem represents a mixing of styles: the obvious Indic influence of Buddhist philosophy, the traditional Tibetan heptasyllabic line (*tsheg bar bdun can*), and a new verse-inspired stanza arrangement on the page. Lama Jabb's observations on Tibetan new verse are equally applicable to Khenpo Kalsang's poem, which clearly “has emerged out of the ‘whirlpool’ of Tibetan literary and oral traditions.”<sup>10</sup>

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8. Stein 1972, 253.

9. Lama Jabb 2015, 234.

10. Lama Jabb 2015, 234.

As is often the case when translating Tibetan poetry into English, the compact, dense verse requires more breathing room in translation, and his terse Tibetan couplets become English tercets. We were also unable to reproduce in translation his tight, traditional Tibetan heptasyllabic line and his metre, composed of three trochaic feet (*tsheg bar cha gsum*) before a final catalectic half foot (*tsheg bar ya gcig*). With masterful skill, the poet alternates accents in the final half foot of each line, the half foot in first line of the stanza being unstressed, followed by a stressed half foot in the concluding line. Unfortunately not rendered in English, in Tibetan both the line and metre resonate strongly with long traditions of Tibetan poetry, echoing acoustic elements found in some of the earliest written Tibetan verse.

Perhaps the important stylistic feature of the poem is the deliberate parallelism in the opening words in five of the eight stanzas, which required some modification in translation: *bdag 'dzin/ bdag med* (self-grasping/ selflessness); *rang don/ gzhan don* (self-interest/ other-interest); *gnyis snang/ gnyis med* (dualistic appearance/ non-duality); *bden zhen/ bden med* (clinging to true existence/ lacking true existence); *rmongs pa/ shes rab* (delusion/ wisdom). In his conscious deployment of these dualistic pairs, the poet deliberately highlights a paradox at the heart of the Tibetan Buddhist relationship to language. The *rang/ gzhan*, self/ other, distinction is of course a fundamental concept in both Tibetan grammar and Buddhist philosophy. Language functions on the basis of this division, yet the Buddha's teachings aspire to a state of realization entirely beyond such duality. As a learned Buddhist scholar, Khenpo Kalsang recognizes the ineffable nature of the Buddhist Dharma, utterly transcendent of concepts, and therefore also transcendent of words. Yet language remains an essential tool by which to access the teachings. We must rely on language, by its nature dualistic and conceptual, in order eventually to arrive to the non-dual, non-conceptual realization of the Buddha.

In his deliberate deployment of these dualistic pairs, Khenpo Kalsang's aim is not only poetic, but also pedagogical and soteriological; he uses words to point to the realization that transcends words. His poem is thus uniquely Buddhist not only in its terminology and content, but also in its form. We the reader watch the dance of the Tibetan grammatical and Buddhist philosophical traditions play out before us in these eight couplets, where a conscious use of dualistic language seeks to liberate us from all such duality.

Finally, I should note how I first came across this poem and its poet. Lopön Kalsang, as he was then called, and I became close friends in the summer of 2022 when, concurrent with my doctoral fieldwork, he studied and I taught at SINI's EDP program, based that summer outside of Manali, Himachal Pradesh, India. Over the course of three months, we had countless conversations about the relationship between language and Buddhist transmission, and how Buddhist teachers must use the flawed, dualistic vehicle of language to lead students to transcendent realization. We have

continued these conversations in our thrice weekly SINI class, now on Zoom, where we translate classical Tibetan Buddhist texts and discuss how best to present the Dharma to contemporary English-speaking audiences.

In our time spent together, I learned that throughout his nearly two decades in exile, he maintained a strong commitment to his mother tongue and Tibetan literary composition, filling notebooks with original prose and poetry. Though he often writes poetry, his humility has previously prevented him from publishing and sharing his work more widely.

In autumn 2022, after I had returned to North America and Kalsang to Namdröling, he sent me a private WhatsApp message in which he shared this poem, both in the original Tibetan and an English translation that he worked on with Merrill Peterson, a longtime student of Tarthang Tulku Rinpoché. I worked on my own translation of the poem and then Kalsang and I arranged two Zoom meetings in which we collaborated to arrive at its present form. With some gentle prodding, and teacherly encouragement from my side, Kalsang overcame his modesty and initial reticence to share his work more broadly, and agreed to allow the publication of his poem in Tibetan with our corresponding English translation. The poem offers us an intriguing glimpse at the poetry of a learned Khenpo who writes beautifully, but whose humility has previously stopped him from sharing his work more widely with others.

On April 22, 2023, eighteen years after first enrolling at Namdröling Monastery's *shedra*, Kalsang received the title of Khenpo from Karma Kuchen Rinpoche, the 12<sup>th</sup> throne holder of the Palyul Nyingma lineage. This poem marks his first international publication since receiving this prestigious title, which reflects his erudition, discipline, and devoted service to the Buddhist teachings.

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