

# Eighty-Four Thousand Reasons to Translate the Canon

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**Abstract:** 84000, a collaborative project to produce and publish translations of the canonical texts of Tibetan Buddhism and make them available to a broad readership, is entering its fifteenth year. This article focuses on some of the reasons for the project's overall scope and the importance of the canonical texts.

## Introduction and Overview

I imagine—maybe deludedly—that few readers of this journal are entirely unaware of the existence of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, a collaborative, hundred-year project to see the canonical texts of Tibetan Buddhism made available in translation to readers online, world-wide and free of charge. 84000 started up in 2010 and is now entering its fifteenth year.

A full and detailed description of the project and all its features, achievements, policies, human resources, funding, management technology, history so far, problems, prospects, and so forth would be long, and to many readers tedious. Anyone interested in finding out more about 84000 would glean a clearer picture of it by consulting the project's own site (84000.co), its Reading Room, and its published translations than by reading a detailed and exhaustive description here.

So instead of trying to produce a full-specs data sheet—or for that matter a promotional brochure—on the project, I will attempt to highlight selected features both of the project itself, and of the literature it is translating, by keeping in mind some broad questions that were foundational to 84000's launch in the first place: what is the place of the canon? What is the point of translating it?

And since the canon is well on the way to being translated anyway, the thoughts I will set out here hover over a rephrased question: what light has the process of translation so far shed on the reasons for translating it?

I am Senior Editor at 84000, but I should make it clear that these are simply my own reflections, and should not be taken as statements of 84000's official policy.

I will approach these questions from eleven different perspectives:

- The canon as representing the Dharma

- The canon as vehicle of Buddhist culture
- The canon as structured and interconnected collection
- The canon as fruit of a project significant in medieval world history
- The canon as literary corpus
- The canon as textual history
- The canon as common ground
- The canon as undifferentiated primary source
- The canon as record of the Buddha's life and teachings
- The canon as basis of scriptural authority
- The canon as transformative power of the Buddha's speech

Between these rubrics there is of course plenty of overlap, and the distinctions are not hard and fast.

This is not the place for a discussion of what is meant by a canon, Buddhist or otherwise, but I should clarify at this point that simply for the purposes of this article I will be talking mostly about the Kangyur. It is implicit in 84000's goal statements, and explicit on the 84000 site, that the Tengyur is also included in "the canonical texts of Tibetan Buddhism" that constitute its scope, but it was agreed from the outset that for the first twenty-five years the project's resources should be concentrated on publishing in translation "the whole of the Kangyur and some related texts in the Tengyur." The initial twenty-five year period comes to an end in 2035, and the project is well on track to achieve that preliminary goal by then.

## The canon as representing the Dharma

To be born in a central land (*yul dbus su skyes pa*), as every student of Tibetan Buddhism knows, is the very first of the ten advantages (*'byor ba bcu*) that make human life truly meaningful. A "central land" is glossed as a place where the Dharma is to be found. Even in the distant past that definition was far from static, expanding as Buddhist culture spread from its earliest Magadhan origins to reach, by the sixth century, most of Asia, including distant Korea and Japan to the far northeast, and Sumatra and Java to the far southeast.

Yet while so much of Asia was becoming "central" as Buddhist thought, culture, and literature swirled through it, a dark hole had been left in the middle of the swirls. Tibet had remained a Dharma-less, untamed borderland (*yul mtha' 'khob*) virtually untouched by Buddhism throughout those many centuries, despite being so close geographically to the Buddhist heartland on the Gangetic plain.

When eventually Buddhism was adopted as the official religion in Tibet by a powerful impe-

rial dynasty that, thanks to the shifting circumstances of military power and trade, had acquired the necessary resources, one of the most essential elements in becoming a “central” land was to invite learned scholars and preceptors, train native translators, and set about the great task of translating the scriptures. The early scholars and translators, as well as those who followed later, made strenuous efforts to collect whatever they felt to be authentic scripture that was available to them in their times, whether from the great monastic universities of Nālandā and Vikramaśīla, the schools and monasteries of China, the communities of learned masters in Kashmir, or siddhas and yogis in remote caves and wandering on riverbanks.

This carefully collected and translated textual material came to Tibet, of course, along with its living tradition of study and practice. It came with the Dharma of realization embodied in the scholars and yogis who received and transmitted it and who, by the huge work of translating it, gave it meaning to the generations of Tibetans who inherited it, preserved it, used and extended it, down to the present day. This is the canon for Tibetan Buddhism, and if the written texts are not sufficient just by themselves to be called the Dharma, they are an important and tangible resource essential for its existence.

The canon in Tibetan is not the only version of the Buddhist canon that exists in the world today, but it is wide ranging in its scope and has preserved texts that have not survived elsewhere. Along with the other Buddhist canons, it has been slowly seeping into other parts of the world outside Asia that—however they might have seen themselves—were not “central lands” from a Buddhist viewpoint. But they are becoming so.

When the study and translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan into Western languages began in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with pioneers like Csoma de Kőrös, Eugène Burnouf, Phillippe-Édouard Foucaux, Léon Feer, Salomon Lefmann, Sylvain Lévi, Édouard Chavannes, and Étienne Lamotte, the canonical scriptures must have seemed an obvious starting point, by analogy with how the Abrahamic religious traditions are rooted in their own scriptures. Some complete Mahāyāna sūtras, notably the *Lalitavistara* and *Lotus Sūtra*, were translated, but they were few and far between.

The Pali Canon fared better. When the Rhys Davids of the Pali Text Society began to translate the Pali literature in the late nineteenth century they focused overwhelmingly on the canonical sutta texts rather than on the commentaries, and by the early twentieth century large portions of the Pali Canon had been translated into English. Their translations and the many revised and improved versions that have followed were, and indeed still are, widely understood by a general reading public to represent *the* Buddhist scriptures.

Anthologies such as Henry Clark Warren’s *Buddhism in Translations*, first published in 1896, contained only translations from the Pali, and not until a new edition was produced in 1953 did the then editor of the Harvard Oriental Series see fit to mention the existence of translations of Mahāyāna works. Edward Conze, best known for his translations of many of the Prajñāpāramitā

sūtras during the 1950s and 1960s (which reached a remarkably wide audience), also edited in 1959 an anthology for Penguin Classics, *Buddhist Scriptures*, that included excerpts from Mahāyāna works as well as from the Pali Canon.

In the 1970s and 1980s the rapid spread of interest in Buddhism, initially influenced in part by translations of non-canonical works published earlier by D.T. Suzuki and W.Y. Evans-Wentz, quite quickly led to a profusion of Buddhist translations far too numerous to detail here. But few of them were translations of works in the Kangyur. Those few translations of Mahāyāna sūtras and tantras that were made tended to be the work of academically oriented translators with an emphasis on their historical and philological context, and were often published in specialized, academic journals and books, or even as unpublished PhD theses. Compared to the translations of the Pali Canon, they had little impact on a wider public.

The translation of canonical texts from Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan Mahāyāna sources, and from Sanskrit and Tibetan Vajrayāna sources, has nevertheless rather slowly gathered momentum.

At the same time, especially over the last two or three decades, the Tibetan source texts in the form of digitally scanned prints of an increasing number of different Kangyurs have been made available online. They are accessible wherever there is an internet connection, thanks to the invaluable efforts of Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC) and its collaborators such as the Vienna-based Resources for Kanjur and Tanjur Studies (rKTs) site. To a lesser extent, too, scanned Sanskrit manuscripts and editions have become more easily available. Lexical resources of all kinds, digital and printed, have proliferated.

The impetus behind 84000's launch was to speed up the process of translation, and the conditions are more favorable than they have ever been.

## The canon as vehicle of Buddhist culture

Decades ago, long before getting swept up in 84000, I wondered, while working on the translation of Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (*kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*), where on earth in Buddhist literature or oral tradition Patrul's sources could be for such weird stories as that of the sea-captain called "Daughter" having his brains pulped by a metal wheel, or the boy offering four beans to the Buddha Vipasyin and as a result becoming the universal emperor Māndhātṛ, born from a soft tumor on his father's head; now I know.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The story of "Daughter" (Maitrakanyaka) comes in the 36th story of the *Avadānaśataka* (*gang po la sogs pa'i rtogs pa brjod pa brgya pa*, Toh 343), and also in the *Vinayottaragrantha* (Toh 7a); 84000's translations of both are in progress, but for the first see Appleton 2020, 183–192. The full story of King Māndhātṛ fills the entire ninth chapter of *The Chapter on Medicines* (*Bhaiṣajyavastu*, the sixth section of the *Vinayavastu*, Toh 1), and the offering of four beans in one of his past lives comes at 9.269–273. King Māndhātṛ also figures in the account of the Buddha Śākyamuni's family ancestry near

If anyone asks, 84000 can also point out different versions of the narrative telling us how the disciple Aśvajit first inspired the young Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana to seek out the Buddha by summarizing his teaching in the “*yedharma hetu...*” formula;<sup>2</sup> numerous lists of the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks of a buddha;<sup>3</sup> the texts on which rituals used in the construction of stūpas are based;<sup>4</sup> and two dhāraṇīs to recite in case you may be worried about the consequences of receiving offerings intended for the Three Jewels.<sup>5</sup>

Just as I could fill many pages listing topics like these that I myself have found intriguing, I could also fill many more with arcane details that almost no one will find life-changing. Among these I could cite the name of the mother of the three hundred and sixty-second Buddha who is to appear in the Good Eon, or a list of the thirty-three different species of trees to be found on a mountain on an island beyond the several oceans that lie between the continents of Godāniya and Videha.<sup>6</sup>

I have chosen as teasers these bite-sized pieces of Buddhist lore almost at random, but only to point to the obvious fact that the canonical literature is a vast mass of raw material not only studied here and there with disparate nuggets of the strange, the useful, the puzzling, the fascinating, the disturbing, the clarifying, the useful, and so forth, but also shot through and held together by many rich, wide seams and layers of teaching and explanation. The entire mass of it taken together is the bedrock of Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice, belief and worldview, narrative and imagery—or in other words, Tibetan Buddhist culture; indeed Buddhist culture as a whole.

The transmission of culture is a slow process. Language, of course, is one of the biggest barriers that it has to face. The Buddha is said to have strongly encouraged the translation of his teachings into the vernacular languages of his time. The point was not to keep a body of sacred but remote works in a specialized language that could only be interpreted to ordinary people by a priestly elite. Integral to the transmission of Buddhism to some parts of Central Asia, China, Vietnam,

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the beginning of *The Chapter on a Schism in the Saṅgha* (*Saṅghabhedavastu*, the seventeenth and final section of the *Vinayavastu*, translation in progress), in which we read of several generations born like him through parthenogenesis.

2. Note that Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana were called Upaṭiṣya and Kolita (or Kaulita) before becoming Buddhist bhikṣus. The “classic” version comes in *The Chapter on Going Forth* (*Pravrajyāvastu*, Toh 1), 1.283–305; while in *The Ratnaketu Dhāraṇī* (Toh 138), 1.3–36, the narrative features a longer version of the *yedharma* stanza and the story is dramatically enlivened by Māra’s attempts to cause obstacles.
3. These are too numerous to list exhaustively here, but see *The Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-Five Thousand Lines* (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, Toh 9), 62.76–19; *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eighteen Thousand Lines* (*Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, Toh 10), 73.89–93; *The Play in Full* (*Lalitavistara*, Toh 95), 7.98–103; and *The Questions of Rāṣṭrapāla* (1) (*Rāṣṭrapālapariṣṭhā*, Toh 62), 1.328–38.
4. The two dhāraṇīs known as “the two stainless ones” (*dri med rnam gnyis*), Toh 510 and 599, translations not yet published. See 84000’s knowledge base stub on stūpas, 2.3.
5. *Dakṣiṇāpariśodhanī* (Toh 777/1011) and *yon yongs su sbyongs ba’i gzungs* (Toh 778/1012). Both translations are still unpublished.
6. Respectively in *The Good Eon* (*Bhadrakalpika*, Toh 94), 2.B.867; and *The Application of Mindfulness of the Sacred Dharma* (*Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna*, Toh 287), 5.401.

Tibet, and Mongolia was the translation of scriptures. In other countries, though, the scriptures were kept in Sanskrit, Pali, or Chinese, classical languages that in those places were still widely accessible through higher education.

Quite what the transmission of Buddhist culture might mean in the context of today's global multiculturalism is difficult to say. There are different levels at which the process is partly at work. There are many localized groups absorbing what they can of such a transmission. But realistically we are probably not going to see the kind of widespread, large scale, society-wide adoption of Buddhist thought and practice as a whole that seems to have happened in the past. Selected Buddhist ideas are finding a place in some fields of wider culture, thought, and practice. Meanwhile Buddhism and its literature and history—sometimes even very arcane nooks and crannies of them—are themselves the object of academic scholarly study.

The overall picture can at times resemble the parable of the group of blind men encountering an elephant; each individual, feeling a different part of the elephant's body, comes away with a very different idea of what an elephant is.

But in any case, few people in the modern world are going to be able to learn Sanskrit, classical Chinese, or Tibetan to the level required to read the canonical source texts. To enable Buddhist culture to be understood as widely and deeply as possible—for whatever ends—the widest and deepest possible range of canonical literature needs to be available in translation. This, in essence, is why 84000 exists.

“Available” is no less important than “in translation.” 84000 cannot tell who its readers will be, or where they might be located, but they should have free access worldwide. At present the only way to ensure near universal availability is by online publishing. One day, 84000 will publish printed books of the translations; it is, most people think, more pleasant to read from a book than from a screen, and books are probably the best medium for long-term survival. But books are expensive, difficult to distribute worldwide, almost impossible to distribute without a price, and can only be updated by printing new editions.

Being able to update the translations is important. One consequence is that 84000 is able to make translations available to readers earlier than it would if they had to be perfect before being published—an impossible criterion, of course. Is it not preferable for readers to have a reasonably ready translation to read now than a perfect one in fifteen or twenty years' time? The corollary is that translations will not just be published once and forgotten, but will need to be continuously upgraded.

## **The canon as structured and interconnected collection**

If online publishing allows 84000 to make the translated texts available everywhere, and to keep improving the translations, it also allows all of them to be accessed in the same place, as

a collection. Importantly, the Tibetan source texts can be viewed and read in parallel with the translations. Cross-references between texts are easy to pursue. The entire corpus is searchable. A collection-wide cumulative glossary, compiled from individual text glossaries, can be viewed, searched, or browsed. In the future there may be ways to present the collection and its content according to the needs and preferences of different readers. In other words, this has the potential to become, more and more, a curated collection. Moreover, the translations can be produced and published according to a set of specifications that gives them a certain coherence.<sup>7</sup>

The texts of the Kangyur and Tengyur are not only a subset of Buddhist literature as a whole, already tied together by its principal themes and marked by parallel passages, common elements, and its own cross-references. Collectively, they also constitute a quite distinct corpus (see the next heading, too) that has its own structure and metadata arising from the long evolving historical process of their compilation from a range of sources with a diversity of influences. Moreover, the place of any individual text within the structure of the collection has a significant bearing both on how it is to be understood, as well as on how—for 84000’s purposes—its translation should be approached.

Different Kangyurs vary in the way they structure the texts into genres and order them, but there are broad similarities. 84000 has taken the Dergé Kangyur, first printed in 1733, as the model and presents the English translations first and foremost in the same structure of sections and genres, and in the same order, as the Dergé Kangyur. The layout of the Dergé Kangyur is explained in detail in Situ Pañchen Chökyi Jungné’s catalog, or *karchak* (*dkar chag*), which accompanied that initial printing. The text catalog numbers 84000 uses—“Toh numbers”—reflect as closely as possible those of the catalog produced from a later printing of the Dergé Kangyur by Japanese scholars at Tōhoku University in Sendai, Japan and published in 1953.

There are, of course, many ways to access a dematerialized database of online translations. But to maintain at least the default option of keeping the structure of the collected translations close to the traditional structure of the collected source texts in the Kangyur seems a good way of preserving the collection’s metadata, explicit and implicit.

In the *karchak*, and in the arrangement of volumes and genres, the Dergé Kangyur (at least until we come to the tantra sections) is formally ordered in terms of the Buddha’s three turnings of the wheel of Dharma, even if the three in this context do not quite match the three turnings as they are usually understood and set out in the *Samdhinirmocana* and the commentaries based on its distinctions.<sup>8</sup>

The first turning is represented by the Vinaya section, a kind of canon in itself within the canon, containing as it does the entire corpus of the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, and thus the most

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7. 84000’s *Guidelines for Translators* and other resources can be seen at <https://84000.co/resources/for-translators>.

8. See *Unraveling the Intent*, 7.30.

clearly Śrāvakayāna section of the Kangyur (but not the only one).<sup>9</sup> Its seven mostly multivolume texts purport to set out the rules for monks and nuns, and the reasons for their existence. But in so doing they also include a vast wealth of biography, narrative, history, and teaching. This, by the way, is where the seemingly missing overlap with the Pali Canon fills out into a wide range of parallels, not only of strictly vinaya-related material but of sūtras, narrative, and dramatis personae. Only because the Vinaya texts are not broken up into many small units, like the Pali suttas, is that overlap at first sight invisible.

The Vinaya material has its own structuring principles and styles and its own terminology. Vast though the texts are, they are divided into themes and subthemes by means of brief verse summaries (Skt. *uddāna*, Tib. *sdom gyi tshigs*) forming an internal index. Offenses, formal acts of the saṅgha, and a host of other categories use ordinary-looking words as very specific terminology. As 84000 started work on this material, it soon became clear that a team of specialized translators and editors would be needed, working in close communication and using a uniform translation terminology and glossary standardized across all the texts of the genre—which is not necessarily the case for all the other sections. So far only two texts have been published: two chapters, the second and third longest of the seventeen parts of the *Vinayavastu* (Toh 1), that together demonstrate the extraordinary range of material to be found in this genre. The rest is all currently making good progress, and more will be appearing soon.<sup>10</sup>

The second turning is represented by the Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) section.<sup>11</sup> Its content probably needs no introduction here. 84000's translators and editors have been confronted by one predictable factor, the sheer length of the long sūtras magnifying the time to be invested in any detailed work on them. That 84000 has already been able to publish translations of three of the four longest Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, as well as a weighty first installment of the very longest of all, is satisfying. The terminology has not yet been made as consistent as it needs to be in certain places, and further time will be needed to harmonize it.<sup>12</sup>

To have all these texts of common origin—long, medium-length, and short, “mothers” and

9. See the Vinaya section in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC11495.html>

10. See *The Chapter on Going Forth* (Toh 1 ch. 1) and *The Chapter on Medicines* (Toh 1 ch. 6).

11. See the Perfection of Wisdom section in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC14665.html>

12. For example, on the one hand the language of *The Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred Thousand Lines* (Toh 8) and that of *The Perfection of Wisdom in Twenty-Five Thousand Lines* (Toh 9) are very similar in the Tibetan and Sanskrit source texts, and we have been fortunate that the translator of the *Hundred Thousand* has agreed to stick as closely as possible to terms and style already used by another translator who had already completed the *Twenty-Five Thousand*. On the other hand, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eighteen Thousand Lines* (Toh 10) is substantially different from the other two (this is the case for the Chinese as well as Tibetan) even though it covers the same ground in the same order, so it is acceptable that it is rather different from the other two in translation. Our translation of the *Eight Thousand* will be very different again, reflecting as it does another translator's take, based closely on the Sanskrit and its wordplay.



“children”—together in this one section of the collection makes it easy to cross-reference and compare them. It is less obvious but important that texts in other sections that take a second turning perspective, doctrinally speaking, can be linked to them, too. And it is in this section of the Kangyur that 84000 has experimented with ways of linking a Tengyur commentary to the sūtras that it explains with interactive cross-references and synchronized navigation.

The third turning is formally represented in the classification scheme of the *karchak* by the two sections of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* and, surprisingly enough, the *Ratnakūṭa*.<sup>13</sup> The *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, presented as one long *vaipulyasūtra* (Toh 44), seems to have originally existed as a family of texts closely related in theme but (some at least) circulating independently. Without any mention of the *sugatagarbha* as such, it presents its own characteristic—and magnificent—themes that are certainly closer to the third than the second turning. The Tibetans admire and revere it, but never studied it in as much detail as the Chinese with their Huayan tradition. 84000 has so far treated its chapters as if they were standalone texts, but the first twenty-nine probably deserve to be seen as a single work, and a specialized subgroup of translators and editors are now ensuring as much consistency as possible within the genre. Translation started with some of the later chapter-texts that are most known in Tibetan tradition, such as the *Gaṇḍavyūha* and the *Daśabhūmika*,<sup>14</sup> and the existence not only of several other chapters that have closely related but independently translated counterparts elsewhere in the Kangyur, but also of several other sūtras elsewhere in the Kangyur that bear all the marks of *Buddhāvataṃsaka* texts, both point again to the potential advantages of a curated, cross-referenced collection under one roof.<sup>15</sup>

The *Ratnakūṭa*, on the other hand, fits a “third turning” classification much less well. Although presented in the titles and colophons of its texts as if it had some status as a single *vaipulyasūtra*, it is set out in the Kangyur as an anthology of standalone sūtras that could be described as a “best-of” selection with a wide scope. They are certainly not limited to third-turning themes, have all sorts of topics, and belong clearly to a number of different genres. There are texts on vinaya and perfection of wisdom texts, as well as sūtras drawn from different strata of the canonical literature. One of its features as a compilation is its close matching to the Chinese *Ratnakūṭa* anthology, making the Chinese translations important as relevant source texts.

Next is the General Sūtra (*mdo sde* or *mdo mang*) section.<sup>16</sup> Situ Pañchen in his Dergé Kangyur *karchak* notes that in terms of the three turnings classification, earlier editors of the Tsalpa (tshal

13. See the *Buddhāvataṃsaka* in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC14666.html>; and the *Ratnakūṭa* at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC14667.html>.

14. See *The Stem Array* (Toh 44–45) and *The Ten Bhūmis* (Toh 44–31) respectively.

15. The relationships of *Buddhāvataṃsaka* chapter-texts with sūtras elsewhere in the Kangyur are summarized in 84000’s knowledge-base description of the section, *Ornaments of the Buddhas (Kangyur Section)*.

16. See the General Sūtra section in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC14668.html>

pa) Kangyurs classified the Mahāyāna sūtras as mostly third turning but with some of the second turning mixed in with them; he is simply following their arrangement.<sup>17</sup> The ordering of texts in the section does, however, follow some internal divisions, the chief one being into Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna (sic: yes, the now rather frowned-upon terms *theg chung* and *theg dman*).

The Mahāyāna section starts off with some of the most renowned and celebrated works like the *Bhadrakalpika* (Toh 94) and *Lalitavistara* (Toh 95),<sup>18</sup> the *Karuṇāpūṇḍarīka* (Toh 112) and *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* (“Lotus Sūtra,” Toh 113),<sup>19</sup> and its 193 sūtras all the way down the list as far as two rather interesting dedication texts, *Fulfilling All Aspirations* (Toh 285) and *Protecting All Beings* (Toh 286), as a fitting culmination of the category.<sup>20</sup>

The Hīnayāna section starts with the monumental (but seemingly incomplete) *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna* (Toh 287), spanning four volumes with its minutely detailed descriptions of some of the realms of saṃsāra—though here again Situ Pañchen simply invokes tradition for categorizing it as Hīnayāna, against the opinion of Patshab and Ngok.<sup>21</sup> The next 73 sūtras, down to the end of the section, span all kinds of genres, many but by no means all drawn from the Mūlasarvāstivāda literature, starting with the *paritta* Mahāsūtras and including the great *avadāna* and *jātaka* narrative compilations like the *Karmaśataka* (Toh 340),<sup>22</sup> *Dzanglun* (*mdzangs blun*, Toh 341), and *Avadānaśataka* (Toh 343). The section nears its end with some unsettling prophecies about how the Dharma will decline and disappear.

The general sūtra section as a whole is as full of surprises as it is full of classics. There must, of course, be reasons why later Tibetan tradition has left fallow some of the rich fields of doctrinal material some of these almost unexplored works contain, but it is high time they—along with the best known and most revered texts too, of course—were made available in translation.

The next great division of the Kangyur is the Tantra collection, itself divided into the four levels of unexcelled yoga tantras (*anuttarayoga* or *yoganiruttaratantra*), yoga tantras, conduct tantras (*caryātantra*), and action tantras (*kriyātantra*).<sup>23</sup>

Among these diverse groups of works are some of the crown jewels of the Vajrayāna, the special heritage of Tibetan Buddhism. They include the tantra cycles that are still extensively practiced and studied—Kālacakra, Hevajra, Cakrasamvara, Guhysamāja, Vajrabhairava. But there are also some texts belonging to traditions of tantric practice that have all but disappeared and for which no living lineage remains. Were I to attempt even a quick survey that did justice to the value of this

17. Dergé *dkar chag*, folio 123.a.

18. See *The Good Eon* (Toh 94) and *The Play in Full* (Toh 95) respectively.

19. See *The White Lotus of Compassion* (Toh 112) and *The White Lotus of the Good Dharma* (Toh 113) respectively.

20. See *The Dedication “Fulfilling All Aspirations”* (Toh 285) and *The Dedication “Protecting All Beings”* (Toh 286).

21. Dergé *dkar chag*, folio 134.a.

22. See *The Hundred Deeds* (Toh 340).

23. See the Tantra collection in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC20565.html>.

whole range of tantric works, I would take far more space than I have been allotted. If I pass over it as fleetingly as I have here, that should not be taken as proportional to its importance.

The tantras are, of course, among the most difficult texts to translate, and 84000, with the completion of the rest of the Kangyur well in sight, will from now on be concentrating increasingly on this part of the collection. In many cases, it is only by studying and translating the relevant Tengyur commentaries and consulting specialists in the living tradition that such work can be done at all.

A separate section, not present in all Kangyurs and indeed only added to the Dergé Kangyur long after the first printing, is the Old Tantras—a very limited selection of the tantras of the Nyingma tradition, most of which were felt by many of the scholars (of other traditions) who compiled the first Kangyurs to be inauthentic according to their own criteria and were therefore excluded from the canon.<sup>24</sup> Translation of the texts in this group is proceeding, but is complicated by the large number of alternative source texts in the much larger *Nyingma Gyübum* (*rnying ma rgyud 'bum*) collections to be consulted and referenced.

Another tantra section is the Wheel of Time Commentary, consisting of a single text, a long commentary called the *Vimalaprabhā* (“Stainless Light,” Toh 845) on the *Kālacakra Tantra*, that is also found in the Tengyur.<sup>25</sup> The *Kālacakra Tantra* itself is in the unexcelled yoga subsection of the Tantra collection, but this text has its own section, being technically a commentary but in status somewhere between an explanatory tantra and a human-authored commentary. Its author is Puṇḍarīka, the semi-mythical ninth king of Shambhala. An 84000 translation of this important work, in parallel with a translation of the tantra itself, is nearing completion.

Finally, the Dergé and most other Kangyurs include an additional section, the Compendium of *Dhāraṇīs*, probably derived from independently circulating compilations of *dhāraṇī* texts.<sup>26</sup> All but twelve of the 250 works in this section are duplicates of works found elsewhere in other sections, mostly either the general sūtra or action tantra sections.

The *dhāraṇī* texts are of diverse origin, mostly being short texts recited as ritual protection against a range of ills such as disease, untimely death, natural catastrophes, war and other conflicts. Their use is widespread in all Buddhist cultures and many of them, even those also classified as action tantras, are not particularly tantric.

Their presence in the canon brings a corrective to the idea that Buddhist practice is centered uniquely on lofty metaphysical goals. While some of the *dhāraṇī* texts that 84000 has translated

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24. See the Old Tantras section in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC20566.html>; for more detail see the section description *Old Tantras (Kangyur Section)*.

25. See the Wheel of Time Commentary in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC20567.html>.

26. See the Compendium of Dhāraṇīs in the 84000 Reading Room at <https://read.84000.co/section/O1JC114941JC20568.html>.

and published might seem like relics of a vanished magical-medieval world view, among them are some that appear to be still popular and widely used against the vicissitudes of life.

## The canon as the fruit of a project significant in medieval world history

Quite suddenly in the seventh century, Buddhism was taken up in Tibet by a militarily powerful and wealthy dynasty with the resources necessary to set in motion one of the most extraordinary cultural projects in world history. The significance of the great cultural transfer of Indian and Chinese Buddhist thought to Tibet in the seventh to ninth centuries, so evident to anyone conversant with the history of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, is hardly recognized in the wider Western world. It surely deserves comparison to the translation of secular classical works from Greek into Arabic in Baghdad under the Abbasid caliphs that was taking place, as it happens, almost simultaneously.

Translation itself, in the narrowest sense, was only one of the many skills necessary to produce an entire corpus of literature in a new language. From linguistic and doctrinal training and study, administration of work and resources, editing and proofing, through to papermaking, inks, scribal skills, indexing, and library management, all sorts of tasks, roles, and experience must have had to be put in place and developed.

We know little of the technical or organizational details. Along with the translators' colophons, the *Mahāvvyutpatti* and *Drajor bampo nyipa* (*sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa*) are among the few contemporary records that allow us to gain a little understanding of what was involved. Centralized decision-making and funding of the kind only a government can bring into play were clearly crucial. Much of the translating and editing of texts seems to have been done at Samyé (*bsam yas*) near Lhasa. What we do know is that by the early ninth century when the early inventories of translated texts were compiled, close to a thousand works had been translated and had, in many cases, even gone through an extensive revision process to ensure consistent terminology and other linguistic conventions.<sup>27</sup> They included the majority of sūtra, perfection of wisdom, and vinaya texts, along with many dhāraṇīs and action tantra works, and a significant number of treatises and commentaries.

But the favorable conditions were not to last long. The imperial sponsorship and administration of this extraordinary translation project collapsed in the mid-ninth century, and translation

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27. Of the two extant early inventories, the *Denkarma* (*ldan dkar ma*) lists 736 works and the *Phangthangma* (*'phang thang ma*) 959. The inventories included only exoteric works, and translations of the higher tantra category, access to which was restricted by imperial decree, were not publicly catalogued.

activity in Tibet seems to have stopped almost entirely until the eleventh. But this was far from being the final phase.

Partly instigated and sustained by royal patronage in Western Tibet, but notably less centralized than in the imperial period, a new generation of “later diffusion” (*phyi dar*) translators arose in the eleventh century, bringing to Tibet a new set of tantric works, a few additional sūtras, and many treatises. For during the centuries that had passed since the early period, not only had new Indian tantric lineages and their texts appeared, but also new and significant commentarial and philosophical works had been composed by Indian scholars. In addition to the great monastic universities of northeastern India, the paṇḍitas of Kashmir had become a new and important source of learning and transmission.

But gradually it must have become clear to Tibetans that India was not going to continue being an inexhaustible source of new learning and new texts. The vast Buddhist monastic institutions in India depended on extensive patronage, which had been declining along with political fragmentation. By the end of the twelfth century, Nālandā, Vikramaśīla, and Odantapurī, no longer adequately protected by local powers, had been sacked by Turkic troops as part of a long, slow wave of invasion and conquest from the northwest. Tibet had even become a place of refuge for Buddhist monks and scholars fleeing from India, some of whom continued to contribute to Sanskrit Buddhist literature while in Tibet.

The translated literature of the earlier and later periods, housed in collections in monastic libraries, each with its own different composition and organization, thus came to constitute a kind of snapshot of the principal texts available in India during the final centuries of Buddhism’s flourishing in the land of its origin. But at the same time a growing literature of works by Tibetan scholars, some of them translators as well, was being added to the collections in libraries all over Tibet. The need to distinguish the translated Indic material from indigenous writing must have become clearer by itself as time went on. As the translated works were now being seen to have reached a finite limit, a new impetus to catalog and systematize them took form.

The power of the Mongols had been growing rapidly; they conquered Tibet in the mid-thirteenth century and absorbed it into their own fast-expanding empire. Tibet suffered upheavals and losses under the Mongols, but once again the availability of resources and patronage led to a new phase in the consolidation and ordering of the translated scriptures. Manuscripts were actively collected and compared, genres and ordering schemes were devised, and a clear division was made between translated scriptures that could be considered the words of the Buddha himself on the one hand (*bka’ gyur*) and the translated treatises by Indian authors (*bstan’gyur*) on the other. Finally, the mid-fourteenth century, still with Mongol patronage, saw the first production of the edited and collated Kangyurs and Tengyurs which set patterns still almost unchanged in the many Kangyurs and Tengyurs extant today.

We may thus owe the existence of the Kangyur and Tengyur today to the fact that the Mongol

imperial court grew to respect and eventually to sponsor Buddhist scholarly activity. Its scholars and editors certainly fared better than those of the Graeco-Arabic translation project and their great House of Wisdom library far to the west, for it was the Mongols, too, who in 1258 attacked Baghdad and razed its many splendors to the ground.

## The canon as literary corpus

Here I am referring especially to the literary features of the canonical texts in their Tibetan translation. Needless to say, they are all translations, a large majority from Sanskrit but some from Chinese, and a few from Pali and other languages such as Apabhraṃśa and even Khotanese. Their style, syntax, and lexical uses and range are quite different from works composed by Tibetans in Tibet. They are also characterized by a large number of modular phrases, expressions, and even substantial passages.

Many of the translators who have worked on 84000 projects had little prior experience of the canonical texts. It takes time to become familiar with the language of the corpus as a whole, and indeed with the more specialized language of certain genres within it. It also takes time to acquire the habit of trying to see, through the Tibetan, what the original Sanskrit may have been because, depending on the section concerned, for a large majority of works there is no extant Sanskrit text.

Although 84000 started out with a grants application process open to all prospective translators, it became increasingly clear after the first few years that the best and most efficient way of working would be to build up a team of committed translators who could gain long-term experience with the corpus and its genres. Now, as the project concentrates on some of the most difficult parts of the Kangyur, to have gathered a permanent, in-house team—not only of translators but of editors, copyeditors, technical editors, and technology staff—is bearing tangible fruit.

The exploration by academic specialists world wide of the canon as a literary corpus, connected as it is with textual parallels in the canonical corpora of the Chinese Tripiṭaka and the extant Sanskrit literature, has yielded a large amount of information of close relevance to 84000's translation work. Many important studies are not easy to access. It has proved essential that 84000's translators and editors come fully equipped with the necessary academic training and experience to make full use of the invaluable published material on the corpus, and where possible to contribute to it, too.

## The canon as textual history

Every Tibetan text in what many people imagine as “the Kangyur” exists, rather, in the form of multiple versions in the more than forty different known Kangyurs, as well as in other extra-ca-

nonical collections or perhaps embedded in a commentary. In many cases, it may also be extant in multiple Sanskrit manuscripts or editions, and in different Chinese translations. These versions are all different, whether slightly or extensively so, and have complex historical relationships that, in many cases, remain to be fully unraveled.

The fullest exploration and documentation of many canonical texts is the domain of academic philology. Some texts have taken up many years of a specialist's career, the focus of such work being the compiling of a detailed critical edition and the painstaking analysis of variants through history and lineage to build up a complete picture of everything that can be known about it. A translation is by no means always the outcome of such an approach—and even if it is, the target reader is likely to be another philologist, and the translation is likely to be published in a specialized book or journal outside the reach of ordinary readers.

It is important that such text-critical work on the canonical texts and their history be carried out. On the other hand, for any text there is a point on the graph of resources versus value that has to be chosen appropriately for the scope of the task in hand. 84000's resources are not unlimited and the project is aimed at many kinds of readers, not just the specialized philologist, historian, or linguist. Translators and editors need to have at least a working knowledge of philological methodology and to have access to the most relevant source texts—but then to select the most relevant sources and pick out the variants that have the most significance, and the most impact on how the text is to be interpreted. The approach needs to be flexible across different genres. In some cases, 84000's publications have included an appended critical or diplomatic edition. Text-critical work that has already been done by others needs to be consulted and referenced.

Finally, too, what can be known about a text needs to be explained clearly in a contextualizing introduction, notes, and other ancillaries so that all those who are interested can access it, but without that material being an impediment for readers who are more interested simply in the text's explicit content. To this last remark, though, I would add that the imaginary archetype of the “educated general reader” may be more sophisticated than we think. To dumb down too far historical introductions, variant reading footnotes, and the like may well not be rendering many readers a real service.

## **The canon as common ground**

Like Tibetan Buddhism, the whole panoply of Buddhist traditions across Asian cultures has divided into schools and lineages each with its own interpretations and emphasis, sometimes quite widely divergent from those of others. Their literature, too, while often maintaining a strong dependence on scriptural sources, is not shared across all schools. The canonical scriptures, on the other hand, are the common ground.

The canonical texts of the Kangyur are where Tibetan Buddhism intersects with the traditions and literature of other Buddhist cultures: Indian, of course, and most closely with those of other countries where the Mahāyāna is widespread such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, but also the countries of South East Asia that follow the Pāli tradition. As Tibet's magnificent isolation dissolves, its rigorously maintained lineages of transmission, study, and practice must inevitably encounter other traditions as the evolving adaptations of the Dharma to modern times and lifestyles gradually take shape. Even Tibet's Vajrayāna heritage, largely unique though much of it is, has roots that extend down to scriptural sources maintained in common with other Asian traditions.

The intermingling of cultural traditions and particularly spiritual ones is slow. In today's world, not only Tibetan Buddhists, but their Western students, remain largely distinct from Chinese Buddhists, Japanese Buddhists, Vietnamese Buddhists, and Buddhists of the Theravādin tradition, whether culturally indigenous or converts.

Yet English translations of the scriptures from all these diverse sources, in at least overcoming the barrier of language, will inevitably facilitate contact across traditions. What will result is difficult to predict, but it is surely a positive first step.

## The canon as undifferentiated primary source

It is a peculiar consequence of how Tibetan Buddhism is taught both traditionally and hence to modern, non-Tibetan audiences, that the canon itself—at least the Kangyur—is not seen as central to an understanding of the path of practice as one might expect from a quick glance at the relationships between other religions and their scriptures, and even other Buddhist traditions and their scriptures.

Worldwide, there are of course major differences between Buddhist traditions. But to a surprising degree, too, the different lineages within Tibetan Buddhism are compartmentalized, and the partitions between them sometimes fiercely reinforced. Unlike the differences between the various Asian traditions, these are partitions that cannot be attributed to a language barrier. Rather, they are the result of preferences and interpretations, and especially of a different secondary literature. Yet those lineage views, despite their differences, are all based on the same primary sources in the canon.

There is nothing wrong with the existence of a range of lineages, commentarial traditions, lifestyles, and approaches. Like biological diversity, it helps to provide a multitude of different niches among which each individual can find a suitable nurturing and inspiring environment. It would be disastrous for all the lineages and traditions to be blended into one bland and uniform



purée. Yet surely there is benefit in anyone being able to access the primary, scriptural sources in their undifferentiated state, as well as through their chosen school's favorite interpretive treatises.

It is not only because of different schools and lineages that there are different interpretations of the same canonical statements. Distinctions such as which statements are provisional and which definitive, how to understand emptiness, what is a tathāgata's *jñāna*, and so forth are of course helpful as guides to an understanding of how the scriptures can and have been interpreted. We do not need to start from scratch. But when unfamiliarity with the primary sources brings ignorance of the origins and contexts of such doctrinal freeways, the depth of meaning of the scriptures can be missed.

Underlying the curricula of most traditional Tibetan *shedra* (*bshad grwa*) studies is a widespread and influential principle: that the most important literary basis of Buddhist thought is not the canonical, *buddhavacana* scriptures but the much more systematic and structured presentations in the treatises and commentaries. These works, the argument goes, have extracted all the necessary schemata for study and practice, whether elementary or advanced, from the haphazard raw material of the sūtras, tantras, and even the vinaya. Why use the raw material when all its most useful ingredients have been extracted and refined? The argument is far from being without substance. But it does neglect several very important points, especially when applied as it has been to decisions about what should or should not be translated.

The most basic neglected point is that commentaries, interpretations, and explanations of the scriptures ultimately depend for their validity on the continuing existence of the scriptures themselves (this will come up in the point below regarding scriptural authority). When the commentaries are brought across a linguistic or cultural frontier, the scriptures surely need to be, too.

Moreover, commentaries and interpretations mostly take a certain angle that is not the only possible angle to be taken. They select some scriptural statements and ignore others, or apply different criteria to evaluate different statements. They also take for granted doxographical classifications that are not explicit in the scriptural texts themselves and may be subject to evolution and revision. The possibility of a return to the sources is a necessary safeguard.

For various reasons, too, historically some scriptures have been extensively studied and mined for their doctrinal content while others have remained virtually unexplored. The fertility of interpretation and scholarship requires the fullest possible range of raw material to be available—again, a little like biological diversity in the realm of the ecosystem. Who can tell what new practices and traditions might evolve in response to new needs and preferences, still within the range of valid interpretation of the scriptures, but from a different choice among those scriptures?

Finally, the canonical material is in itself a unique and precious literary corpus, with its own history and forms of expression. In particular, it is held together by the connective tissue of an astonishing wealth of narrative and background detail, most of which is irrelevant to doctrinal commentary and refinement, yet constitutes a rich and vital cultural framework. As in all cultures,

the narrative element of the canon is itself a precious form of transmission, which often takes place outside formal systems of instruction and works on the imagination, reappearing in works of art and poetry, and placing ideas and aspirations directly into the realm of the living human being. Much of that connective tissue has been stripped out of the commentaries and treatises, in the interest of efficiency and systematization.

For those of us who have been plunged into the sūtras, the vinaya narratives, the *dhāraṇīs*, and even the tantras in the Kangyur by our work for 84000, a frequent experience is one of the pleasure and even astonishment that comes with reading teachings and accounts that, perhaps even because of our own ignorance, we are not reading through some interpretive lens or doxographical classification. It is not pre-labeled as Madhyamaka or Yogācāra, Mahāyāna or Śrāvakayāna, definitive or provisional—it is simply what is being said.

As just one almost random example, here without further comment is the beginning of a passage on the qualities of a tathāgata's body, from a seemingly almost unexplored Mahāyāna sūtra called *The Absorption of the Thus-Gone One's Wisdom Seal*:

Then the Blessed One explained to him, “Śāradvatīputra, the true body of the Thus-Gone One transcends any view, like the sky. It is incorporeal, uncreated, unborn, and unceasing. It is nonoccurring, truly nonoccurring, and utterly nonoccurring. It is unobtained, unimputed, nonengaging, unestablished, boundless, and limitless. It is peaceful, placid, and absolutely serene. It is nonabiding, nonarising, ineffable, beyond mind, and beyond origination. It is unmoving, utterly unmoving, and free of movement. It is totally pure. It is nothing whatsoever and exists in no way. It is beyond appropriation and acceptance. It is without motion, without activity, and without support. It is unborn, unarisen, without action, and without ripening. It is unseen, unheard, uncognized, detached, not bound, and not released. It does not exist. It is not recalled, not held, not experienced, and not seen. It is beyond cognition, is not an object of cognition, and is characterized by absence of cognition.

It is without mind. It is unfathomable and unimaginable. It is not mind. It is devoid of mind. It possesses the mind of sameness. Nothing is the same as it, and it cannot be comprehended by any act of mind. It has not gone anywhere, does not go anywhere, is without going, and has eliminated any going. It is uninterrupted, immeasurable, uninterrupted, boundless, unobservable, and marvelous. It has no substance and is no substance. It is insubstantial. It is not a distinction and has no distinctions. It is nonarising, truly nonarising, unshakable, nondiscursive, nonconceptual, beginningless, unestablished, and wholly unestablished. It is not accomplished, without pervasion, and motionless. It is not clear, not

tangible, and not a thing to be desired. It has no light and does not appear. It is not apprehended and has no appearance. It is without darkness, is not darkness, and is free of darkness. It is not lucidity. It is without abode and free of abode. It is not at peace, by no means at peace, without peace, and free from peace. It is the same as peace. It is pure, totally pure, and wholly pure.”<sup>28</sup>

The passage is too long for more of it to be quoted here, but the interested reader will find the rest of it at the click of a mouse in the link in the footnote.

## The canon as record of the Buddha’s life and teachings

It is another peculiar consequence of how Tibetan Buddhism is taught that many Western students of traditional Tibetan Buddhism know rather little about the Buddha. Depending on the lineage they have had most contact with, they are far more familiar with Guru Rinpoché and Longchenpa, Sakya Paṇḍita and the other great Sakya hierarchs, Marpa and Milarepa, or Jé Tsongkhapa.

I think this may be less true of Tibetans, who inherit seamlessly through their very culture an appreciation of the Buddha as well as these great lineage founders. My impression is, too, that in recent years that imbalance has been partially redressed. But there is still a remarkable lack of familiarity with all but the most schematic outlines of the Buddha’s life and teachings. In my own Dharma community, for many years it was to Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Old Path White Clouds* that our lamas directed students to find out more about the Buddha’s life, for want of any detailed account translated from Tibetan sources. That was not because there were no such accounts; they had simply not been translated.

In the Kangyur there are, of course, narratives about the Buddha’s movements and his encounters with people, places, and events scattered throughout the sūtras. There are also numerous accounts of the Buddha’s own past lives and the past, present, and future lives of numerous other buddhas. But there are several works in the Kangyur that specifically tell the story of the Buddha’s life.

The quite well known *Lalitavistara* (Toh 95), already published by 84000, tells part of that story in detail from a rich and expansive Mahāyāna viewpoint, but only up to the point after the Buddha’s awakening when he first begins to teach.<sup>29</sup>

Rather less known is another, very detailed account in the Vinaya, seen from a more straightforward perspective and including the whole of the Buddha’s life and parinirvāṇa. This is the *Saṅghabhedavastu*, the final chapter of the *Vinayavastu* (chapter 17 of Toh 1), which has the Bud-

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28. *The Absorption of The Thus-Gone One’s Wisdom Seal (Tathāgatajñānamudrāsamādhi, Toh 131), 1.22–3.*

29. See *The Play in Full* (Toh 95).

dha's life as its main narrative thread (the title, meaning "The Chapter on a Schism in the Saṅgha," has reasons for being as it is, but does not convey the full scope of its content). The 84000 translation is not yet published but is making good progress. So too, as a by-product, is that of a closely related sūtra, the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa* (Toh 301), which is a standalone compilation of the passages in the *Saṅghabhedavastu* relevant to the Buddha's life story.<sup>30</sup>

Other Vinaya works tell many of the other stories from the Buddha's lifetime that Buddhists ought to know. To give two among a huge number of possible examples, the extraordinary story of the celebrity courtesan Āmrapālī who became his disciple is told in the *Cīvaravastu* and *Bhaiṣajyavastu*, the seventh and sixth chapters, respectively, of the *Vinayavastu* (Toh 1);<sup>31</sup> and the story of how the Buddha persuaded his reluctant half-brother, the "handsome" Nanda, not to marry the beautiful Nandā but become a monk and eventually an arhat is told in detail in the *Vinayakṣudrakavastu* (Toh 6).

That these detailed and instructive works will soon be available in English translation may help to redress the imbalance.

## The canon as basis of scriptural authority

"Tibetans themselves don't read the Kangyur..." This statement (and others like it) was put forward as an argument against the whole idea of translating the canon in some of the discussions among translators and scholars that led to 84000's launch. As I have already pointed out, there is some truth to it. Tibetan Buddhism is indeed mostly taught from the treatises and commentaries, with their convenient organization of the raw material into coherent systems and topics, instead of from the raw material of the canon itself.

The very principle of writing treatises, however, is that they are based firmly on *buddhavacana*, the Buddha's words, and not innovative compositions that set out the author's own insights, or new ideas the Buddha never thought of. They must have a lineage going all the way back to the Buddha.

Without the underlying foundation of the canonical scriptures, would the treatises and commentaries stand up on their own? In the context of a cultural transfer from one language to another, this is a weighty question.

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30. The *Saṅghabhedavastu* and *Abhiniṣkramaṇa* are the principal sources for Tārānātha's *The Dawning of Faith* (*dad pa'i nyin byed*), essentially an abridged version of them. Tārānātha's work is the basis of the murals and text of the *The Life of the Buddha*, a website published by the The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia (<http://lotb.iath.virginia.edu/>).

31. The *Cīvaravastu* (*The Chapter on Robes*, Toh 1–7) tells the story of her infancy as a foundling and her early life, but the translation is not yet published. The *Bhaiṣajyavastu* (*The Chapter on Medicines*, Toh 1–6), among the many wide-ranging narrative passages in the chapter, tells (3.218–63) of her inviting the Buddha to Vaiśālī and the teachings he gives there.

The writing of treatises and commentaries, down to the present day, has always followed the convention (unfortunately not always followed by modern Western Buddhist authors) of backing up every important point that is made by including at least one citation from the scriptures, and sometimes many. The most common form of citation is a four-line stanza, or two or three sentences of prose. Many of these short clips from the canon are very well known, and come up again and again in the work of different authors. It is easy to slip into seeing this feature of the treatises as just a convention, and to lose sight of its purpose.

Generally, of course, the idea of scriptural authority or *āgama* is accepted as one of the ways of establishing the truth on any subject, the other being reasoning. Part of its *raison d'être* goes back to Indian epistemological thought and, in particular, to Dignāga and Dharmakīrti's works on valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*). While direct perception and inference are taken as the two essential sources of valid knowledge (for evident and non-evident phenomena respectively), the non-Buddhist idea that the "sound" (*śabda*) of the sacred works (notably the Vedas) is acceptable as another source is excluded. But something rather like that scriptural "sound" foundation of knowing takes the form of Dignāga's according to the Buddha the status of *pramāṇabhūta* (*tshad ma'i skyes bu*): a person, or rather *the* person, who has become epistemically authoritative. Because he has the exalted cognitive power of a tathāgata, his statements—particularly on "extremely non-evident" phenomena—should be taken as entirely reliable.

Even the great doctrinal debates that have continued down the centuries, many of which are essentially about how to interpret apparently conflicting statements in the scriptures by positing different intentions that the Buddha may have had in uttering them, are ultimately based on the idea that his statements, the scriptural teachings, are the bottom line.

There have always been a few Tibetan scholars who, even if primarily as an individual private interest, did read the Kangyur extensively. Whether for them, or for others who may have lost the habit of actually taking out the volumes of the Kangyur to read texts at length, it has always remained extremely important that the scriptures still exist and can be consulted. Their writings may have relied mainly on those short citation clips chosen by scholars of the past, but implicit in the use of those citations, brief as they are, is always a longer notion of their source and context.

It seems to me that viewing the canonical scriptures, the Buddha's very words, as the ultimate authority and source of the teachings, the ultimate reference point, is a big part of why the Kangyur is held in such esteem and indeed as a potent and material symbol of the Dharma, an aspect I will come to.

But if it were only a symbol, why would the great scholars who compiled and edited the many Kangyurs produced over the centuries have gone to such lengths to ensure the most correct readings possible of every text? 84000 has recently published a translation of Situ Pañchen's account

of his own impressive efforts to establish the Dergé Kangyur in one chapter of the Dergé *karchak*, which gives some idea of the time and resources necessary for such an enterprise.<sup>32</sup>

And why would it have been so important to keep the living tradition of transmitting the reading aloud of the Kangyur? My own teacher, Kangyur Rinpoché Longchen Yeshe Dorjé (bka' gyur rin po che klong chen ye shes rdo rje, 1897–1975) was one of several lamas in each generation who acquire that title because of their efforts to ensure the transmission of the Kangyur. Although he was the lineage holder of many important tantric cycles, of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā transmissions, and a discoverer of concealed spiritual treasures (*gter ma*), he also went to immense trouble to receive an extensive range of rare or near-extinct transmissions of Kangyur texts, and to give the reading transmission of the entire Kangyur no fewer than twenty-five times during his life.

As the canonical texts are brought into a new language and a new cultural space, it seems as important as ever to keep in mind their weight as the ultimate reference point. There is little doubt that the teaching and transmission of Buddhism will take new forms, as it has in the past when crossing linguistic and cultural borders. Parts of the canon that may not have been highlighted by Indian, Chinese, or Tibetan scholars may find a new relevance, while other parts may not seem so central. But if all we have left are the four-line citations used in the treatises—which altogether must make up far less than one percent of the Kangyur as a whole—that would be a great loss.

Some readers of this article may be thinking by now that I am setting out too much of the traditional party line to be truly objective here. In our age of silos, is it not only a matter of time before some fundamentalist Buddhist preacher starts brandishing statements from the canon as weapons in some simplistic militant movement? Heaven help us, for even in the past Buddhism has not had as completely clean a slate in that area as we might like to think.

As a rational Western thinker, am I really able to believe that there are no apocryphal texts, or that the authorship of all the texts in the canon goes back in an unbroken line to the Buddha's actual words in 400 BCE? No, to be honest, I am not. In fact I confess to having my own cynical streak.

But there is a measure in all things, and I do not need to strain too hard to keep an open mind. This is not the place to start even a brief discussion of the important nuances that qualify definitions of *buddhavacana* in Tibetan Buddhist scholarship, other than to mention that they exist. There are also two additional safeguards that for me stand out. One is that I have seen for myself how seriously the Tibetan scholars I have met take the authenticity of lineage and transmission; the other is that I have considerable confidence in the sophisticated traditional discipline of scriptural interpretation.

I should add here that in my own experience and in that of many of my translator colleagues, to seek and find the citations in the canonical texts—not always an easy task, as there are misquotes

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32. See Tai Situ Chökyi Jungné (ta'i si tu chos kyi 'byung gnas, 1700–1774), *The Third Well-Spoken Branch: An Exact Account of How All the Victorious One's Teachings Extant Today in the Land of Snow Mountains Were Put into Print, 1.87 et seq.*

as well as mistaken attributions in the literature—and to see them *in situ*, opening up their scope and meaning by exploring their narrative and doctrinal context, is one of the most rewarding discoveries a translator can make.

## The canon as transformative power of the Buddha's speech

A corollary of the spiritual authority and weight accorded to the canonical scriptures is that they are taken *en masse* as symbolically representing the power of the Buddha's speech to transform and liberate. To read them, especially aloud, collectively, ritually, at times of difficulty, on special occasions, is to set the speech of the Buddha resounding in the environment and bring its blessings and beneficial effects to a particular time and place. It is also a way of making merit whether for oneself or others. Readings can be commissioned or sponsored for that purpose. The point here is that the content of the text that is being read is almost of secondary importance; it is what it represents that has transformative power.

As a translator and editor of canonical material, I must admit to having qualms about how this way of using the canon can be extended to English translations. It is easier to accept for readings of the source texts in Tibetan or Sanskrit, even though I know, of course, that the Buddha did not speak in Tibetan, nor for that matter in Sanskrit. But some of the 84000 translations have been used in this way already for “resoundings” on many occasions, and such events are popular. Even if the result is a cacophony of voices reading different texts or different parts of a text, is it not preferable that the readers have at least some inkling of what they are reading about?

In both Indian and Tibetan culture, “reading” is an oral activity. Sound and reverberation are particularly important. In the modern world and in the West, we have not completely lost the notion of reading, performance, speaker and audience, collective recitation, chanting, and singing. Even football matches come to mind. But reading is also something we are most accustomed to doing alone, often silently. The reverberation is mainly in the mind.

So in a wider sense, to read the canon, even by oneself, is to bring about the resounding of the Buddha's speech. Understanding with the intellect as well—is there not still some magical transformative power at work?

## Conclusion

I hope to have been able to convey, first and foremost, my admiration and enthusiasm for the texts of the Tibetan canon. By extension, too, my strong wish to see it all translated into English—and then, hopefully, into many other languages.

Much has been done to lay the foundations for that huge task to be realized, by all the translators and scholars who have progressively opened up this body of literature to exploration, analysis, and understanding over the last two hundred years, and indeed by the scholars and practitioners in Tibet who collected and compiled it in the first place and have kept it alive over the centuries.

Thanks to extraordinarily generous private sponsorship from a widespread international community, 84000 has the great fortune to have been able to concentrate significant resources to accelerating progress on the task. The time is ripe but there remains a lot to do.



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