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# TRANSLATION & TRANSMISSION

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KEYSTONE, COLORADO, USA

Plenary Session | ROOM: CASTLE PEAK | 2:00pm, October 4, 2014

*Scholars, Translators, Practitioners: What is our Role in Transmission?*

with Willa Miller, Alex Berzin, Larry Mermelstein, Richard Barron,  
Karl Brunnhölzl, Christian Bernert



Larry Mermelstein  
(Nālandā Translation Committee)

Beginning in 1971, Larry Mermelstein became a close student of the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and scholar, and he is empowered as a senior teacher, or acharya, by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. He has been the Executive Director of the Nalanda Translation Committee since 1978, the same year he became an editor at Shambhala Publications, where he continues to serve as a consulting editor. He was among the founding administrators and later a language teacher (Sanskrit and Tibetan) at Naropa University, and he was a member of the Vajradhatu/Shambhala International board of directors for many years.

## Larry Mermelstein's Presentation

# Scholars, Translators, Practitioners: What is our role in transmission?

Larry Mermelstein: Translators and the Process of Transmission

## 1. Specifically what roles do translators play in the transmission of the vajrayāna to new cultures?

Obviously, translators are crucial.

Background issues: Is the target culture receptive to or conversant with sacred-world realities (i.e., the nonrational, pre-materialistic)? Are there Padmākara-like needs in terms of taming or subduing local negativities?

Is there an established vocabulary (usually through a reasonable amount of publishing) for Buddhist texts? For vajrayāna materials? If not, it is a major endeavor to create one, obviously something done by translators.

Was this vocabulary created in concert with lamas, especially those of great realization? Or is this the purview of the translators and scholars on their own, hopefully in consultation with Tibetan experts/lamas and existing literature?

Translators need to know the context of the original, as well as having a deep understanding of the source and target cultures. With vajrayāna it's the same, but perhaps the task is more potent or with increased responsibility: issues of secrecy, the need for interpretation. Hopefully the target culture is not overly fascinated or deeply invested in its projections (e.g., the mystique of Tibet) and able to develop clarity. The depth of understanding and tone of communication can have a huge influence on how translation is received.

English translations are likely to be inherently more communicative to their readers than the Tibetan originals were to the Tibetan culture, due to the much-higher degree of literacy and education.

Role of **bilingual lamas**—extremely important, especially when the lama has great realization and/or learning, coupled with significant fluency in the target language. The lama thus becomes both a translator and transmitter of the dharma inseparably.

How can unenlightened people transmit the enlightened essence or principles? Obviously, we do the best we can. Maybe it doesn't matter that much in the long run, as others will amend things.

Translator of texts involved in transmission:

- abhiṣheka texts (dbang dpe): for lama, excerpts for students
- sādhana or other liturgies
- practice commentaries
- compiling of instructions in target language
- helping students to understand all of the above
- possibly teacher for new students on behalf of lama

Translator as poet, musician (esp. for liturgical works to be made chantable, metrical, set to music).

**Translator as interpreter** for lama giving talks, transmissions (lung, dbang, khrid), presuming the lama is not fluent in the target language. Personality of interpreter can be very positive or not; being a very neutral channel/transparent medium, though often excellent, is not always ideal. Tone of voice and delivery can make big difference. Some interpreters have great oral delivery; others do not, but might read very well (as a transcript of the talk). Much has been said already about the role of the interpreter.

Interpreter may be viewed as an example of the tradition, perhaps someone potentially special, due to being in the proximity of the teacher, some degree of technical knowledge, possibly a degree of meditative training, etc. Whenever we can embody humility, simplicity, inquisitiveness, care for others, and other qualities that are not among the eight worldly dharmas, that will likely communicate very positive, dharmic things.

## 2. What are the dangers we face in this process and what is at stake?

Ego. We are our own worst problem.

“Ego is the pervasive confusion of appropriating energy in a self-centered way.”  
—*The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 7, p. 261

Everything is at stake. Is the whole thing going to work?

We could get the words wrong, not understanding the meaning. We have to ask the right questions (of lamas) to ascertain the meaning. Everything is filtered through our mind, understanding, and experience; there's always some interpretation.

Editorializing: some needed to provide context, or to expand a very dense/terse text.

Making mistakes is inevitable; are we willing/able to correct them? Are we able to accept feedback, especially from other translators? Are we being understood properly? Are we curious about other ways to translate or publish something? Can we be an unbiased channel?

Changing the understanding of the tradition (e.g., *arhat* [“worthy one”] vs. *arihan* [Middle Indic, “enemy subjugator”; translated wrong word into Tibetan, *dgra bcom pa*]).