

THE BEAUTY OF THE TIBETAN LANGUAGE

by David Curtis

The Tibetan language is beautiful, powerful, and interesting in its own right. But what is more, knowledge of Tibetan can contribute significantly to one's Dharma study and practice. In fact, to study Tibetan is to practice the Dharma. The texts were written and translated by realized masters who were also great literary masters and their sole motivation was to liberate beings. Looking into the specialized language they created to convey the innermost essence of the Buddha's teaching can be profoundly inspirational. The Tibetan language is a finely crafted vehicle fashioned by enlightened beings to bring the mind to awakening. Below is a retelling of the story of the coming of the Dharma to Tibet with special emphasis on the role the Tibetan language played in the process.

More than a thousand years passed from the time Buddha Shakyamuni taught the Dharma in India until the teachings reached the Land of Snows on the other side of the Himalayas. Buddha lived some 2,500 years ago, but it was not until the reign of the first Great Dharma King of Tibet, Songtsen Gampo, in the seventh century of our era, that the Dharma first began to be propagated in Tibet.

From the time of the Buddha onward for the next millennium the Dharma not only flourished in India but began

to spread throughout neighboring lands in every direction. The Buddha had lived and taught in northern India in a state called Magadha in the region of the Ganges River. After his lifetime (560–484 B.C.E.) northwestern India had become a powerful center of Buddhism. And it was from this area that

the Dharma traveled northward through present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan to reach the Silk Road from where it journeyed east to China in the first century.

Between the first and the seventh centuries of the previous millennium many of the states that existed in Central Asia in the region where far northern and eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan are today became converted to Buddhism.

The Dharma permeated these lands to the extent that Sanskrit, the sacred language of the Mahayana and Tantrayana of India, became the international religious language of the

region, and the mountains and valleys were filled with monasteries, temples, and stupas.

During this time Tibet was a warlike nation surrounded by Buddhist lands. Under King Songtsen Gampo (617–99), the thirty-third king of Tibet, the Tibetan empire had reached its greatest degree of expansion. In increasing their domain both to the east and west the Tibetans conquered the Buddhist principalities west of Tibet



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and through them came to know about Buddhism. Furthermore, for purposes of political alliance the king married both a Nepali and a Chinese princess. The royal families of both these two neighboring countries were Buddhist, and one version of the story says that Songsten Gampo was converted to Buddhism by these wives.

Bhrikuti, the Nepalese princess, who is regarded as a manifestation of Green Tara, came to Tibet in 639 bringing with her Buddhist texts, Buddhist artwork, and medicinal herbs. Weng-cheng, the daughter of the Buddhist emperor of China, an emanation of White Tara, brought the great statue of Buddha known as the Jowo, as well as tea, paper, and ink. The Jokhang temple was built especially for the Jowo statue and it still remains there today. These two princesses brought peace with her neighbors to Tibet and helped lay the foundations for bringing inner peace to the people by playing significant roles in the bringing of Buddhism to Tibet.

Once King Songtsen Gampo converted from war-mongering to Buddhism, he became determined to share the Dharma with his people. At the time Tibet was not a highly cultured place with libraries and universities abounding. Rather the people were largely nomadic and warlike. The Tibetans were not unlike some of the Native American tribes of the Great Plains a millennium later.

King Songtsen Gampo realized that if the Dharma was going to be meaningful in the lives of his people, they had to be educated in the Dharma. India, "the noble country," was the home of the world's first universities, and above all it was the source of the Dharma. India still preserved the magnificent repository of all the Buddha's teaching in the texts of her great monastic universities as well as in the many realized masters of the different Buddhist lineages that had developed since the Buddha's time.

At Nalanda University the five greater and the five lesser

arts and sciences of the Dharma were taught. These five greater arts and sciences include the inner science of mind, which is the teaching we think about when we think about the word "Dharma," as well as fine arts, grammar, medicine, and logic; the lesser arts and sciences are comprised of astrology, poetics, prosody, synonymics, and drama. Looking over the list we see that four of the ten arts have a great deal to do with language. And what is more, the wisdom regarding all the fields of study was recorded, mostly in Sanskrit, in the great books of the Indian libraries and universities.

Thus, language has been at the heart of the transmission and preservation of the Dharma. In order to accomplish his goal of bringing the Dharma to Tibet, the king sent his brilliant minister Thonmi Sambhota and sixteen other young men to India to study at Nalanda. Their mission was to master these fields of study and to return to Tibet to work for the king in his great project to bring the Dharma to his people. Travel from Tibet to India today can quickly border on the harrowing. One can only imagine the difficulty of the trip before roads, bridges, and motor vehicles existed. Their journey was fraught with the dangers of thieves, carnivorous wild animals, incredibly high mountain passes, and deep gorges. Of the seventeen young men sent to India only Thonmi Sambhota returned. And he didn't merely survive; he returned from Nalanda having mastered all the Buddhist arts and sciences, including the Sanskrit language.

On his return, Thonmi worked closely with King Songtsen Gampo to create a script for writing the Tibetan language, and he wrote an eight-volume grammatical work elucidating the science of the Tibetan language. He and the king began the process of translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan.

Thonmi's mastery of the academic and inner aspects of Buddhism made it possible and created

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Form is emptiness; emptiness is form

the foundation for one of the most significant cultural achievements in world history. Over the next 600 years Tibetans translated the enormous canon of Buddhism from Sanskrit, Chinese, and other languages. Working largely in translation committees staffed by Tibetan scholars as well as by scholars of the original language, these translations were worked and re-worked over the centuries until the Tibetan canon, as we know it today, was established. Their translation work is very highly regarded by specialists for its beauty and precision. And in fact, it is said to be possible to re-create lost Sanskrit texts with considerable accuracy by translating back into Sanskrit from the Tibetan.

Part of what Thonmi and the early translators, both during his lifetime and over the subsequent centuries, accomplished was the creation of an entirely new Tibetan language. The former vocabulary of the Tibetan herdsman and warriors was insufficient to express the sublimities and the subtleties of Buddhist thought. In order to express these ideas an entire new vocabulary and also a new grammar had to be formulated. It was this "new Tibetan" that was used to create the hundreds of thousands of Buddhist texts that made Tibetan literature perhaps the largest in the world down to the time of Gutenberg and made possible the full conversion of the Tibetan people to the Dharma and into one of the happiest the world has known.

Modern Dharma practitioners are finding great joy and meaning in studying this language of the lamas. In subsequent columns I will be introducing readers to the wonders of Tibetan starting with the A B Cs, or I should say the KA KHA GA NGAs. ❁

David Curtis founded the Tibetan Language Institute largely out of a desire to teach Western students the Tibetan language in a simple yet accessible form, enabling them to read and translate Tibetan texts as well as to develop fluency in the colloquial language. He trained for five years at Kagyu Ling Monastic College in France (a Dharma center founded by H. E. Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche), and completed the traditional three-year retreat there in 1992. With an academic background in classical languages, he has been teaching the Tibetan language extensively for twelve years.



JANG CHUB ENLIGHTENMENT

An example of the power and beauty of the Tibetan language can be seen in the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit word for enlightenment, *bodhi*. The early translators chose to create a neologism (a newly coined term) comprised of two Tibetan words, *jang* and *choob chub* (pronounced *choob*) to render this concept in Tibetan. *Jang choobchub*, like *bodhi* in Sanskrit, is found in many important Dharma words such as Bodhi tree, bodhisattva, bodhichitta,... and so on.

Whether we call it *jang chuob*, *bodhi*, or enlightenment, it is a vast subject. Some insight into it can be gained by looking at its Tibetan etymology, which His Holiness the Dalai Lama has elucidated as follows:

JANG The enlightenment quality of having transcended, of having overcome all negativity, all obscurations, all and limitations.

CHUB The quality of a Buddha's realizations and wisdom. Literally, the embodiment of all knowledge.

JANG CHUB The enlightened quality of abandonment of all negativity, all limitations, and the perfection of all the qualities such as loving compassion and wisdom, etc. A perfected state of mind where all negativities have been purified and all positive qualities have been perfected.