

Living in the བསྐྱུས་གླེང་བར་དོ་: Translation as the Preservation of Liminality

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Abstract: The phraseology of Collected Topics (བསྐྱུས་གླེང་) is relatively simple. Works in this genre express the essence of Buddhist epistemology and logic using the strict syntax of Tibetan debate, a language first formulated by Chapa Chökyi Sengé (ཕྱ་པ་ཚོས་ཀྱི་སེང་གེ་) in the twelfth century. Nevertheless, they are incredibly difficult to translate. This is because these debates hinge on subtle ambiguities in Tibetan that are easily lost in English. This paper explores one such subtlety, what I dub the “chi-drotak (མྱི་དྲོཏ་ཀ་བཏགས་) maxim” found in Gelug (དགེ་ལུགས་) Collected Topics. Indeed, Gelug authors consider it *the* “difficult point” of Collected Topics. But without nuanced attention, its English translation can render it either absurd or facile. Its apt translation must therefore preserve the liminality inherent in the maxim’s meaning, which hovers between absurdity and simplicity. Borrowing from Lama Jabb, I extend his metaphor of translation’s being an “Act of Bardo” to discuss the necessity of preserving ambiguity, liminality, and intentional imprecision in translation, with specific attention to its ramifications for translating the chi-drotak maxim.

Keywords: Collected Topics, Buddhist Philosophy, Gelug, logic, epistemology, translation

Lama Jabb has elegantly dubbed translation an “Act of Bardo.” In Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Bardo (བར་དོ་) is the stage between death and reincarnation, a dreamlike plane where the mind contends with nightmarish apparitions

before it finds its way to the next birth. Using the Bardo as a metaphor, Lama Jabb contends that “translation operates in a liminal Bardo-like zone between two languages,” culminating in a rebirth within the target language (2018). As we all know, however, not all rebirths turn out well.

The *Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* (བར་དོ་ཐོས་གྲོལ་)—popularly known as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*—argues that a successful rebirth depends on how one negotiates the Bardo. The trick is to see its apparitions as liminal, neither inherently harmful nor helpful. Only then will seeming demons morph into liberating Tantric deities (e.g., Karma Lingpa 2016, 118-19; also see Bryan J. Cuevas 2003, 192). Similarly, success within the translator’s Bardo demands we embrace liminality. If we eschew ambiguity too quickly, our texts will turn into demons, dragging us to those lowest hells reserved only for bad translators.¹



The cover of Purchok Jampa Gyatso’s (ལུང་ལྷོག་བྱམས་པ་རྒྱ་མཚོ་, 1825-1901) famous Collected Topics text used in Sera Jey Monastic College (མེ་རེ་ཇེ་མངའ་སྡེ་སློབ་ཤེས་གྲྭ་ཆེན་པོ་). It is better known as Collected Topics of the Master (ཡོངས་འཛིན་བསྟུས་གྲུབ་).

1 Here I follow Rasheed S. Al-Jarrah, Ahmad M. Abu-Dalu, and Hisham Obiedat’s model of applying Relevance Theory to translation, especially their remarks that “the translator should not try to explicate the implicatures of the original text, in particular, if the scenario deploys strategic ambiguity” (2018, sec. 2.4). Indeed, Collected Topics could be seen as a sustained exercise in strategic ambiguity.

One poignant example of such a liminality hails from Collected Topics (བསྐྱུ་བློ་བཟོ་བྱ་བ་), a genre of Tibetan scholastic writing focused on epistemology and logic. I center my analysis on a trope repeated throughout Collected Topics that is exemplified in the following maxim, “ལྷི་ལྷོ་བཏགས་ཡིན། ལྷི་ཡིན་ན་ལྷོ་བཏགས་ཡིན་པས་མ་གྲུབ།” I dub this the “chi-drotak maxim.” We can roughly translate “ལྷི་” as “universal” or “property.” “ལྷོ་བཏགས་” is a “superimposition” or “abstraction.” Preliminarily, then, the maxim states that properties—“red,” “big,” “long,” etc.—are abstractions. They are not real. Nevertheless, those things that “are” those properties are not necessarily unreal—i.e., those things that are red, big, long, etc. The Gelug tradition famously claims that this maxim is *the* “difficult point” (དཀའ་གནད་) of Collected Topics (Tillemans 1999, 209-46).

Before deconstructing the semantics of this phrase, let’s examine its syntax, with x substituted for “ལྷི་” and y for “ལྷོ་བཏགས་,”—that is, “ x y ཡིན། x ཡིན་ན་ y ཡིན་པས་མ་གྲུབ།” This formulation is littered throughout Collected Topics. Geshe Chime Tsering² of Sera Jey offers one cheeky modern example: “ཚོ་བོ་དཀ་མིང་འཛིན་ཡིན། ཚོ་བོ་དཀ་ཡིན་ན་མིང་འཛིན་ཡིན་པས་མ་གྲུབ།” (personal communication, June 3, 2022). That is, “Joe Biden is the President. But if someone is Joe Biden, they are not necessarily the President.”

Already, this presents challenges. If we read “ཡིན་” indexically as a copulative (or linking verb), it amounts to nonsense: “ x is y , but if something is x , it is not necessarily y ,” apparently breaking transitivity. In other words, if x is y categorically, it would be absurd to deny that *everything* that is x is not also y . This peculiarity has led some translators to contend that Collected Topics is paraconsistent, i.e., that it accommodates contradictions. Margaret Goldberg thus calls its formulations “antinomies” (1985a; 1985b) while Tom Tillemans opts for the more colloquial “quirky” (1999, 224-25). He even argues that this maxim “would probably never be entertained in English” (1999, 219). In effect, Tillemans dooms the chi-drotak maxim to the Bardo, arguing that it can never take rebirth into English cogently.

2 Sadly, Geshe Chime Tsering passed shortly before the publication of this article in July of 2023. I dedicate this article to him.

Goldberg and Tillemans are giants of translation. Nevertheless, I think they too quickly denounce this maxim as a demon from the hell of logical inconsistency. Jay Garfield thus proposes instead to read “ཡིན་” as denoting a definite description rather than a universal quantifier (personal communication, Feb. 13, 2020).³ On this reading, “སྤྱི་ཚོར་བཏགས་ཡིན་” does not give a universal description of all those things about which a ལྷི་ can be predicated. Rather, it describes ལྷི་ *per se*. We can use the example of color again to make this point. It is fair to say that red is a certain frequency of electromagnetic radiation. This describes red *itself*. But it is not true that anything that *is* red is a frequency of electromagnetic radiation—e.g., a red ball. So, although the predicate “to be a frequency of electromagnetic radiation” is a definite description of “red,” it is not a property that is universal to all red things.

As I demonstrate in a forthcoming paper, Garfield’s solution essentially bifurcates “སྤྱི་” into two different meanings. As a definite description, “སྤྱི་ཚོར་བཏགས་ཡིན་” predicates a property *of properties*—a second-order property. And so, this translates as, “A property *per se* is an abstraction.” However, the ante-cedent in the second clause, “སྤྱི་ཡིན་ན་,” denotes something that instantiates that property. And so, “སྤྱི་ཡིན་ན་སློབ་བཏགས་ཡིན་པས་མ་ཟླས།” translates as, “Instantiations of those properties are not necessarily abstractions” (Forman 2021).⁴ This avoids the problem of lost transitivity, since the subject of the first clause is “properties” while that of the second, conditional clause is “instantiations.” The first is abstract while the other is concrete.

3 For example, consider “Cats are felines” versus “The cat is a tabby.” The first describes a property universal to all cats. And so, the copulative “are” acts as a universal quantifier. In the second, “is” is also a copulative, but describes a quality of one particular cat, for not all cats are tabbies. And so, it gives a definite description of one cat. In Tibetan, both functions are governed by “ཡིན་.”

4 Put another way still, the first clause is a predicate about a predicate, while the second is a predicate about an instantiation. Let A be the predicate “སློབ་བཏགས་ཡིན་” or “to be an abstraction,” while Φx is “སྤྱི་ཡིན་” or “to be some property.” We could express the chi-drotak maxim as $\forall \Phi (A\Phi \wedge \neg \forall x (\Phi x \rightarrow Ax))$. That is: all properties are abstractions, but it is not the case that everything that instantiates a property is also an abstraction.

This gives a viable solution to the problem. However, this translation comes at a price, since it forecloses the very ambiguity that makes the chi-drotak maxim an important focus of Collected Topics. As Tillemans identifies, this maxim is supposed to be “difficult, just as Goldberg says they are “puzzles” (1985a, passim; 1985b, passim). If we translate the maxim in the language of properties and instantiations, we have effectively solved the puzzle in the same breath that we give it. An apt translation must preserve the “quirkiness” (la Tillemans) that makes it a puzzle in the first place. Otherwise, its discussion would seem facile, not difficult.

We might think that this premature resolution is a product of importing property-instantiation talk into our interpretation of Collected Topics. If this distinction is foreign to Collected Topics, then relying on its implied framework would be a poor hermeneutical strategy. But this is not the case. English notions of properties and instantiations come incredibly close to Collected Topics’ differentiation between general characteristics (ལྷི་མཚན་) and specific characteristics (རང་མཚན་), or rather *those things* specifically characterized. Like properties, general characteristics pervade over multiple instances. And like instantiations, specific characteristics belong to phenomena that are unique and particular. The first is abstract, while the latter is concrete.

But notice this mutual conceptual affinity does not help us out of the problem. Even if we replace property and instantiation talk with that of general characteristic and specific characteristic, describing their relationship is not straightforward. If we translate literally, we get, “A general characteristic is an abstraction, but those things that *are* that general characteristic are not,” and we are back to nonsense. Yet if we give a translation based on an assessment of the philosophical meaning, we get, “A general characteristic is an abstraction, but those specifically characterized phenomena that share general characteristics with other phenomena are not,” and we have elided the puzzle. In English we seemed forced either to claim absurdly one thing (ལྷི་) holds two contradictory predicates (it both is and is not a ལྷོ་བཏགས་), or trivially claim that two things—a general characteristic (ལྷི་) and specifically characterized phenomena that possess it (ལྷི་ཡིན་པ་)—have different qualities.

Furthermore, the distinction between properties and instantiations cannot account for every iteration of the chi-drotak schema. Take again Geshe Chime Tsering’s Joe Biden example. According to Geshe Chime Tsering, this instance of the puzzle concerns temporality, not properties and instantiations (personal communication, March 9, 2023). So, we could translate as, “Just because Joe Biden *is* the President does not mean Joe Biden has *always* been the President.”⁵ But again, this translation solves the puzzle in the same breath it states it, sounding facile. Moreover, this translation loses any parallel to the chi-drotak maxim, while in Tibetan, the connection is clear. Indeed, Geshe Chime Tsering presented the Joe Biden example as another species of the conundrum to which the chi-drotak maxim belongs.

In other words, the essence of the maxim (as well as its translation difficulty) is not found specifically in its indices, “ལྷི་” or “སྣོ་བཏགས་.” Rather, it concerns how the syntax of the maxim construes their relationship as defined by the copulative. How should we understand this relationship so defined?

In English, the copulative usually denotes two types of relationships, either identity or predication: either “the flu is a virus,” where two substantives are equated, or “the flu is dangerous,” where the flu has the property of being dangerous. Notice the importance of keeping these functions disambiguated. If the second were to mean the flu *is* the property of being dangerous, it would be a strange claim.

Translating “is” for “ཡིན་” gives way to either the absurd or facile reading depending on whether it is understood as identity or predication. The absurd reading appears when we read it consistently as denoting identity. The facile reading appears when we equivocate, reading it as identity in “སྣོ་སྣོ་བཏགས་ ཡིན་,” as a predicate in “སྣོ་ཡིན་ན་,” and as identity again in “སྣོ་བཏགས་ཡིན་པས་མ་གྲུབ་.” Both readings are *possible* translations of “ཡིན་” in the maxim. This is because “སྣོ་བཏགས་” could be read either as a substantive, “an abstraction,” in which case

5 Or, in Arthur Prior’s Tense Logic, let b = Joe Biden and Φx : “to be the President,” $P\Phi b \rightarrow \neg H\Phi b$.

“ཡིན” denotes identity, or as a predicate adjective, where “ཡིན” denotes the predication of a property.⁶ (A predicate adjective is an adjective that is joined to the noun it modifies by a linking verb.) Neither choice, however, gives the desired meaning, since the maxim is neither absurd nor facile.

However, although “ཡིན” can mean identity or predication, it seems to have greater semantic range. In the chi-drotak maxim, “ཡིན” denotes a relation that is *neither* one of identity nor of predication. Indeed, such relations are a general feature of Collected Topics: one of the most important goals of its study is to equip students with a conceptual toolkit replete with “slippery” relations such as this one.⁷ In the chi-drotak maxim specifically, the expressed relation is such that although general characteristics hold it with abstractions, and specificall characterized phenomena hold it with general characteristics, these specific phenomena do not share it with abstractions. Most generally, this could be described as a transitive relation, or a two-place predicate.⁸

We could think of love as an example. Arden loves Bellamy. But just because Callaway loves Arden, that does not necessitate that Callaway loves Bellamy. What this type of relation means in the context of specifically and generally characterized phenomena remains puzzling. Still, it is not absurd. And it is a puzzle that English struggles to render, since *its* copulative does not have the sufficient semantic range.

6 Indeed, the first ebate introduced to Collect Topics students hinges on this ambiguity. This concerns a white horse. Is a white horse white (ལྷ་དཀར་པོ་ཚོས་ཅན་དཀར་པོ་ཡིན་པར་ཐལ།)? This would seem obviously true interpreting “ཡིན” as a predicate and “དཀར་པོ་” as a predicate adjective. But the debate ends with the conclusion that a white horse is not white. This is based on interpreting “ཡིན” as identity and “དཀར་པོ་” as a substantive. And because a white horse is obviously not *the property* white, the conclusion is a white horse is not white.

7 I am thankful to Drupchen Dorje, who first ointed this out to me (personal communication, December 14, 2018).

8 Put more technically, identity is rendered as an equality, $x = y$, and simple predication by Px , where x predicates the property P . The type of relation in the maxim that avoids both absurdity and being facile would be rendered as the two-place predicate Pxy . In other words, if $a = ལྷ།$ and $b = ལྷ་བཏགས།$, then the maxim could be translated as $Pab \wedge \neg \forall x(Pxa \rightarrow Pxb)$.

Consider the following case from Ngawang Tendar’s (b. 1759) work on Mind Only (ལེན་པ་ཚམས་པ་) as an example. He explains that, according to this school, what we perceive to be an external phenomenon, like the color blue, is actually a manifestation of our own mental karma. And so, that karmic seed “becomes blue” (བག་ཆགས་ཚོན་པོར་གྱུར་པ་) (2008, 150).⁹ An English speaker would most naturally understand the “blue” as a predicate adjective and “becomes” as predication. But this is not what the phrase means. It is not as if the karmic seed itself *is* blue—that is, it does not take on some pigment.

We could foreclose the adjectival reading of “blue” through nominalization and specify “blueness.” But this does not get at the point either. The karmic seed does not turn into the abstract property *blueness*—it becomes the concrete patch of blue that the perceiver sees. So, “གྱུར་” cannot mean identity either. Thus, again, we see English equivocate between property predication—the karmic seed *becomes* blue—and substantial identity—the karmic seed *becomes* blueness—where Tibetan expresses a non-identity relation between substantives—in this case, the relation of *transformation* from a karmic seed into a blue appearance.

Importantly, then, the pedagogic goal of the chi-drotak maxim is not just to elucidate the nature of ལྷི།, but to equip the student with a broad schema for relations, one that includes but is not limited to identity and predication. That is, it must explain how *x* can “ཡིན་” *y* even though everything that “ཡིན་” *x* does not also “ཡིན་” *y*. If our translation does provide an equally broad rendering of this relation, we lose the syntax that Collected Topics is trying to impart, one repeated *ad nauseam* therein.

To return to Lama Jabb’s metaphor, the difficulty in translating Collected Topics is to avoid a premature rebirth. Collected Topics itself seems to live always-already in the Bardo, inherently liminal, teetering on the edge between ambiguous paradox and unassailable certainty, much like those apparitions that can either be punitive demons or amicable deities with

⁹ བག་ཆགས་དེ་ཉིད་ཆ་ཉིས་སུ་གྱུར་ཏེ་ཆ་ཅིག་ཚོན་པོར་དང་ཆ་གཅིག་ཚོན་འཛིན་མིག་ཤེས་སུ་གྱུར་པ་ཡིན་པས་……

a slight change of perspective. If the translator rebirths the Bardo-esque genre of Collected Topics prematurely, foreclosing one for the other, they have missed the Bardo's lesson and are dragged down to the lowest hell, or—even at the hands of angels—taken up to a false heaven. Indeed, rather than translate Collected Topics' maxims into hellish, nonsensical aporia or pleasant but obvious banalities, we must both preserve their “quirkiness” and resist their rendition as trivial.

How, then, can we find a successful rebirth from this བསྐྱེད་ཀྱི་བར་དོ་—the Bardo of Collected Topics? This requires a longer analysis.¹⁰ But to conclude, I offer a few parameters of what a sound translation must accomplish. Again, as the *Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* instructs, the liminality inherent in the Bardo is not just a feature of transition, *but of rebirth as well*. All phenomena, it argues, are liminal—transformable with a slight change of perspective. One only need remember the story of Asaṅga, who beheld Maitreya, the future Buddha, where everyone else saw a maggot-infested dog. The question then is how to translate (or transmigrate) the liminality inherent in the Bardo felicitously and not succumb to its erasure. Again, this appears especially difficult when translating Collected Topics from Tibetan to English, since the latter often demands foreclosure in places where Collected Topics plays with ambiguities. But it is not impossible. Indeed, we, as translators, gain much by seeing ambiguity, liminality, and open-endedness not as something to *resolve*, but as substantive, as much part of the text as its definitive meaning, clarity, and precision. Only with such an attitude can our texts be well-birthing into the target language, such that—like a realized Rinpoche—it holds the memories of its past life in the Tibetan original.

10 Please look out for my work in progress on this topic (Forman 2021).

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