

# On Translation

TRANSLATOR: KEN MCLEOD



KEN MCLEOD is a Buddhist teacher, translator (*The Great Path of Awakening*), and author (*Wake Up to Your Life*). He lives in Los Angeles and directs Unfettered Mind, a Buddhist network that provides training and guidance for those whose path lies outside established centers.

## CURRENT TRANSLATION PROJECT

*Ganges Mahamudra*, or “Pith Instructions on Mahamudra,” which is a song of realization composed by the great Indian yogi Tilopa in the eleventh century on the occasion of Naropa’s awakening. The song was, presumably, transcribed by Naropa and taught to Marpa, who translated it into Tibetan.

## Q & A

*Unlike a lot of Buddhist translators, you’re not an academic. You began translating in the 1970s while you were a student of Kalu Rinpoche. How did having a Buddhist teacher and practice community shape you as a translator?*

I learned Tibetan to communicate with my teacher, Kalu Rinpoche, and fell into translation by default; no one else was around. Rinpoche consistently emphasized practice over academics, and I take the same approach to translation. The three-year retreat gave me the opportunity to taste experientially what Buddhism teaches. Until the retreat, it was as if I had been translating the word “sweet” without ever tasting honey or a chocolate bar.

Translations that are intended for people who use them for practice need to be in English that reads easily and clearly communicates the experience of practice. Two influences helped me here: Wittgenstein’s view of language as a toolbox—different words do quite different tasks; and Guenther’s view that a translation must bring out the meaning of the text.

*You’ve said that students and teachers who rely on translated texts are completely at the mercy of the translator. How concerned should we be about this?*

Very. Here are two examples. The translation of Freud into English transformed an introspective practice into a behavioral psychology because the translator used “ego,” “superego,” and “id” instead of “I,” “over-I,” and “it” (as Freud did in German). In the Buddhist context, the translation of the three poisons as “greed,” “hatred,” and “delusion,” instead of “attraction,” “aversion,” and “indifference” masks their role as deeply conditioned patterns associated with a sense of self.

In general, the reader has no idea what liberties the translator has taken. People expect a translation to be a faithful rendering of the original in a different language. In practice, any translation is really a new work inspired by the original, just as any painting of a sculpture is a new work inspired by the sculpture.

*There’s a website that has eight translations of Ganges Mahamudra by various teachers and translators, including you. Why so many different translations?*

Each of those eight translations reflects the way the translator relates to the text, the audience for the translation, and its intended use. One is clearly academic: it is very precise in terms of words and meanings. Another accompanied an oral commentary, and it faithfully reflects that teacher’s commentary. A third is a flight of devotion inspired by Tilopa’s instruction. My translation is intended for practitioners and I tried to make it read as naturally as possible. [These translations can be found at [www.naturalawareness.net/ganges.html](http://www.naturalawareness.net/ganges.html)]

## THE TRANSLATION

22

What joy!  
With the ways of the intellect you won't see  
    beyond intellect.  
With the ways of action you won't know non-action.  
If you want to know what is beyond intellect and action,  
Cut your mind at its root and rest in naked awareness.

23

Let the cloudy waters of thinking settle and clear.  
Let appearances come and go on their own.  
With nothing to change, the world you experience  
    becomes mahamudra.  
Because the basis of experience has no beginning, patterns  
    and distortions fall away.  
Rest in no beginning, with no self-interest or expectation.  
Let what appears appear on its own and let conceptual  
    ways subside.

24

The most majestic of outlooks is free of all reference.  
The most majestic of practices is vast and deep  
    without limit.  
The most majestic of behaviors is open-minded  
    and impartial.  
The most majestic of fruitions is natural being, free  
    of concern.

25

At first, practice is a river rushing through a gorge.  
In the middle, it's the river Ganges, smooth and flowing.  
In the end, it's where all rivers meet, mother and child.

26

When your mind is less acute and does not truly rest,  
Work the essentials of energy and bring out the vitality  
    of awareness.  
Using gazes and techniques to take hold of mind  
Train awareness until it does truly rest.

## TRANSLATOR'S COMMENTS

In this section Tilopa begins with the basic principle of Mahamudra practice: Mahamudra is not something you do; it is a way of experiencing life that arises naturally when you rest deeply in experience itself.

One challenge in verse 22 is to find English words that reflect the play of the words “intellect,” “action,” and “dharma” in the original. The Tibetan reads, “By dharma of intellect no seeing beyond intellect.” “Dharma” has multiple meanings; here it is “how you do something”—hence “ways.”

In verse 23, the simplicity of instructions found in the first three lines consistently misleads Western readers who don't appreciate the need for supporting instruction from a teacher. The challenge is to convey the simplicity without making the practice sound easier than it is. The term for “the world you experience” is often translated as “the phenomenal world.” The latter, because it makes the world an object, moves us away from our own experience.

Also in this verse, “basis of experience” renders the Sanskrit “alaya,” but it lacks poetry. I prefer to say, “because experience has no beginning.” Tilopa's use of the technical term “alaya” clearly indicates he is pointing to the deepest level of experience.

Verse 24 is based on a traditional framework of late medieval Indian Buddhism, usually rendered “view, meditation, conduct (or action), and result.” The challenge here is to translate the superlatives that abound in Tibetan in a way that doesn't sound stilted in English. Rather than the literal “supreme (or excellent) king,” I use “most majestic.”

Verse 25 is an example of an extended metaphor. Verses such as this tax the translator's poetic ability. The goal is to keep the metaphor alive and the lines flowing.

In verse 26, translators usually render the first line as “people with inferior capabilities” or similar phrases that are accurate literal translations, but Buddhist teachings often use mythic, not literal, forms of expression. A phrase such as “those of inferior abilities” is an example of mythic language that refers to conditioned patterns and tendencies in each of us. I make the mythic interpretation explicit to help Western readers see how it applies to their own practice and experience.

## PARTING WORDS

Translators: you are part of the transmission process. Translate so that the reader can experience the teaching.

Readers of translations: read the translation aloud. If it doesn't sound like English, throw it away. **ED**