Cross-Cultural Transmission of Buddhist Texts

Theories and Practices of Translation

Edited by

Dorji Wangchuk

INDIAN AND TIBETAN STUDIES 5

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Department of Indian and Tibetan Studies, Universität Hamburg

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Edited by Harunaga Isaacson and Dorji Wangchuk

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Foreword

Issues surrounding the theories and practices of translation of Buddhist texts have been an interest for modern scholars from early on, and accordingly have been the main topic of sundry academic gatherings. In February 1990, Tibet House, based in New Delhi, organized an international seminar with the title "Buddhist Translations: Problems and Perspectives," the proceedings of which were edited and published under the same title.* After a somewhat lengthy interval, in July 2012, the Khyentse Center for Tibetan Buddhist Textual Scholarship (KC-TBTS), Universität Hamburg, organized a three-day international symposium on "Cross-Cultural Transmission of Buddhist Texts: Theories and Practices of Translation" (July 23–25, 2012, Hamburg). This symposium has been followed by a series of international events focusing on various aspects of translation of Buddhist texts: Shortly after the Hamburg symposium, in December 2012, the K. J. Somaiya Centre for Buddhist Studies in Mumbai organized an international conference on "Cross-Cultural Transmission of Buddhist Texts: Critical Edition, Transliteration, and Translation." A year and a half later, Prof. Dr. Klaus-Dieter Mathes and Mr. Gregory Forgues organized a one-day workshop on "Translating and Transferring Buddhist Literature: From Theory to Practice" (May 21, 2014, University of Vienna). The latter was followed by yet another related symposium, dealing with "Studies on Translation of Buddhist Sūtras: On 'Outstanding' Translation" (May 24, 2014), which took place within the framework of the 59th International Conference of Eastern Studies (ICES) and was organized by the Toho Gakkai and chaired by

* Doboom Tulku, (ed.) *Buddhist Translations: Problems and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995.

Prof. Dr. Akira Saito (then at the University of Tokyo). Later that year, the Tsadra Foundation, in collaboration with several other foundations and institutions, organized a conference on "Translation and Transmission" (October 2–5, 2014, Keystone, Colorado), in which numerous academics, practitioners, translators, and interpreters dealing with Tibetan Buddhist texts or oral teachings (or both) participated in various capacities. Most recently, in March 2015, the Institute for Comparative Research in Human and Social Sciences and International Education and Research Laboratory Program (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences), University of Tsukuba, Japan, organized a symposium on "Philosophy across Cultures: Transmission, Translation, and Transformation of Thought" (March 5–6, 2015, Tsukuba).

I had the privilege to attend all these events and thus to experience first-hand the rapid developments in the field. It was indeed a humbling experience, which taught me not only (a) the complexity of themes relevant to theories and practices of translation, but also (b) the existence of a persistent interest on the part of various groups—be they academics from the field of Buddhist Studies or Translation Studies, translators, interpreters, or Buddhist masters and practitioners—in exploring and deepening our understanding of the challenges involved in translating and transmitting Buddhist texts and ideas.

The present volume mostly consists of scholarly contributions by participants (arranged in alphabetical order) of the above-mentioned symposium "Cross-Cultural Transmission of Buddhist Texts: Theories and Practices of Translation," which took place in Hamburg in 2012. Each of these contributions deals, in one way or another, with issues concerning the cross-cultural transmission of Buddhist texts in general or with theories and practices of translation of Buddhist texts in the past or present in particular. I would like to take this occasion to pay homage to the late Prof. Dr. Emeritus Michael Hahn (Philipps-Universität Marburg), who over the years contributed in various ways to the translation of both Sanskrit and Tibetan texts into modern western languages. Despite his illness, he worked tirelessly to revise and finalize his contribution to the present volume, which he submitted on March 30, 2014, only about three months before his passing away on July 12. Sadly, he did not live to see this volume in print. I am thankful for having had the opportunity to be in frequent email

correspondence with him over various issues regarding the finalization of his contribution. Michael Hahn was widely known for being particularly kind to younger colleagues, and I can confirm this with much retrospective gratitude.

It is hoped that this volume, with its rich and diverse contributions, will be of some relevance and usefulness to those interested not only in the cross-cultural transmission of Buddhist texts but also in the cross-cultural transmission of texts and ideas—or in specific theories and practices of translation—in other disciplines and fields of specialization.

I wish to take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to all the institutions and individuals who contributed in various ways to the success of the above-mentioned symposium "Cross-Cultural Transmission of Buddhist Texts." My thanks go to all the participants (including those who unfortunately were not able to contribute to the present volume), and also to the students and staff of the Department of Indian and Tibetan Studies, Asien-Afrika-Institut, Universität Hamburg, for their help and support in organizing the event. Special thanks are due to Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche and the Khyentse Foundation without whose vision and support the Khyentse Center would not exist and academic activities such as the symposium on the cross-cultural transmission of Buddhist texts could not take place. Last but not least, I thank the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (*Die Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung*) for their generous financial support of the same event.

Dorji Wangchuk

9.9.2016, Hamburg

Peering Through a Funhouse Mirror: Trying to Read Indic Texts Through Tibetan and Chinese Translations[1]

Jonathan A. SILK (Leiden)

The present paper was prepared for a conference on translation, the theme of which was "Cross-Cultural Transmission of Buddhist Texts," an expression which seemed to me equally to encompass both translations made in historical times (from Indic languages into Chinese and Tibetan, for instance) and translations we ourselves attempt today.[2] Both of these realms of mediation represent prime examples of cross-cultural transmission. The polyvalency is, moreover, compounded by the fact that these two arenas, as vastly distant from each other in time and theoretical assumptions as they may be, are nonetheless bound together: our present-day assumptions, motivations and aims can most

[1] This article was submitted in its final form in July 2013. Only updated references to the publications have been added.

[2] Cross-cultural transmission, to be sure, does not necessarily involve translation. For the purposes of the present paper, however, I leave aside other modes of such transmission, which would include issues of Church Language, for instance, as found in the historical transmission of Pāli texts through Southeast Asia, of *dhāraṇī*s throughout the Buddhist world, and of modern-day recitations of texts like the *Heart Sūtra* in North America: chanting of Japanese pronunciations of Chinese translations of Indic texts, including a mantra that is meant to be something like Sanskrit. This is not a new phenomenon by any means: a number of manuscripts found in Dunhuang preserve ninth century transliterations of Chinese translations (or compositions) in Tibetan script. Their purpose was to allow recitation of texts in Chinese language by those who could read Tibetan script but not Chinese. See for one example Thomas and Clauson 1927, the *Amituo jing* in Tibetan script.

meaningfully be examined only with reference to those of our forebears. Despite its centrality, however, modern scholars of Buddhism, both as a community and as individuals (not to mention students of translation more broadly),[3] have yet to give sufficient attention to the full range of problems raised by the translation of Buddhist scripture,[4] a lacuna which, needless to say, the present essay does not pretend to fill in its entirety. The methods and goals of those who have translated Buddhist scriptures and documents into modern languages have, in fact, probably received significantly less scrutiny than have some of the translation practices of the ancients. But there may be something to be learned by thinking about the two processes together, and it may even not be too much to wish for that a sort of consilience emerge from such comparative considerations.

A variety of starting points are possible with regard to problems of translation, to which the voluminous theoretical and practical literature on the subject attests. In the present contribution I will focus only on a very narrow window, that concerning issues raised by the translation of (putatively) originally Indic Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures, both classically into Tibetan and Chinese, and presently into modern languages.[5] Even thus delimited, there is much that I simply cannot address: questions of annotation, of registers of speech, of the sound of a translation, of technical language and the nonspecialist reader, of reading with a teacher or guide, and on and on. These are not only very important issues, but they are intimately interrelated; it is simply a matter of time and space that forces me to limit myself here. But

[3] It is a sad testimony to our failure as Buddhist scholars to effectively communicate outside our field that the few mentions of Buddhism in the wider theoretical literature concerning translation are (at least as far as I have read) generally both naive and unreliable.

[4] The same may also be said for practitioners, but I do not intend to address directly issues related to modern faith communities here.

[5] Different considerations might apply to works we know, for example, to have been composed in China. It is interesting in this regard to notice the genre of Tibetan translations from Chinese, some of which were transmitted in the Kanjur lineages, others of which we know only from Dunhuang manuscripts. As far as I know, there is no body of *sūtra* texts thought to have been composed in Tibet. For reasons of my own linguistic limitations I do not consider the perhaps equally important materials in Khotanese.

leaving aside a myriad of questions does not mean I do not cast my net wide, for it is always necessary to keep in mind big questions, such as: why translate at all? And in the specific context of what is to follow: Why translate translations, and what does it mean to translate a translation? Answers to these questions, and to the further questions they generate in their turn, hinge in part on who is doing the translating, and for whom. I do not aim to offer general answers to these questions so much as to begin to think about what answers might entail.

In a comparative survey of several modern translations of the oft-studied and repeatedly translated *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, Jan Nattier (2000: 236) introduced her topic as follows: "Every translator of a Buddhist text must confront, at the outset, two fundamental issues: from which version of the text will she translate (for in most cases, even when the text has been preserved only in a single language, these are multiple), and for what audience is the translation intended? Not all such decisions, however, are made consciously, much less clearly conveyed to the reader." These considerations are relevant not only for modern translators, to whom Nattier was referring, but applied equally in the past, though with important differences. It is, first of all, highly unlikely that ancient translators had much, if any, choice in the version of a text they translated.[6] If they did, their criteria were more likely to be what we would consider theological than philological, a point to which I will return below. To take one example, while in principle Tibetan translators looked to India as the source of Buddhist scriptures, when scriptures were available elsewhere and not (directly) from India, they apparently did not hesitate to translate from these other sources as well—in the first place from Chinese, but also from Uighur, Khotanese and others. Preference however seems to have been given always to Indian sources when available. Moreover, while such ancient translators may have thought about their audience, we have few if any clues

[6] We do know, however, that in Tibet those who made use of translations were able to pick in some cases between more than one version (as was very often the case in China, of course), and the retranslation of some texts could also speak to dissatisfaction with the nature of a version, and not to dissatisfaction only with the translation qua translation. As far as I know, however, these issues are not discussed explicitly in traditional contexts.

to the terms in which they did so.[7] What is clear is that in the historical past there was simply no possibility of an academic translation of any Buddhist text—a translation whose home, and also possibly whose audience, lies outside a community of faith and practice. Given this, the motive and intent of ancient translations could have been nothing other than the transmission of the salvific message of the Buddha: a missionizing intent is to be assumed a priori.[8] An academic translation has other goals, not to be sure 'objective,' but emphatically not, by definition, evangelical.[9] These facts stand as fixed posts in relation to which we can fruitfully consider issues of translation both old and new.

The central purpose of translation can be nothing other than (re)presentation: one wants to make present, or make present once again, something now distant (in time or space [including conceptual space], or both). This process implies some concept of the distant object, the 'original.' And although this view is to some degree controversial, at least as far as literary translation is concerned, the aim is often assumed to be to provide as close a point of access as possible to that original, since distance means degradation of the message, whether that be in a spiritual sense—that the pristine voice of God or of the Buddha is lost or garbled—or in a 'degraded data' sense. The latter in fact implies the former: if the data is degraded, the message must be as well, although one can accept the inevitability of the degradation of data without assuming a pristine originary message, this marking one difference

[7] I leave aside—although I do not consider it unimportant—that Nattier's pronoun would be anachronistic if applied to the past: as far as I know, there are no women recorded as translators in, at least, classical China or Tibet.

[8] I do not mean of course that translations were necessarily intended for missionizing to non-Buddhists, or that a (Buddhist) lay audience was conceived of as the target group. For a great many translations (of e.g. Vinaya or Tantra texts), we know that the intended target audience was strictly delimited. This does not correspondingly imply that ultimately the audience necessarily excluded 'outsiders'; in China, for instance, translations could be and were read by non-Buddhists.

[9] Scholars and those with academic credentials may, of course, produce evangelical translations, just as 'believers' may produce scholarly academic ones. There is no necessary correlation between the 'status' of the translator and the result of his work. The same individual is quite capable of functioning in both modes—just not at the same time.

between faith-oriented and academic approaches.[10] For the audience of faith, moreover, later individuals never measure up to the founder,[11] an axiom that goes hand in hand with the assumption of degradation of the transmitted message. If we as academic translators are interested not in some 'originary message' but non-hierarchically in history as process—and with regard to texts, this means that we are not necessarily particularly interested in one phase of the life of a text more than another[12]—it follows that we have no reason to privilege the oldest form(s) of a scripture, and thus we do not *necessarily* need even to ask about these forms, other than as points on a historical continuum[13]—although we must remember that, in contrast, theoretically and ideally these are the only forms ultimately of interest to the faith community.[14] It may be obvious to some readers by this point that much of what I

[10] It is interesting to recall here the idea, applied both to the translation of the Septuagint and to that of the King James Bible, that the translators themselves were inspired by God, thus neatly side-stepping the question of degradation of data in the process of translation. I also note but do not explore here the fact that at least in some Buddhist contexts translations can attain de facto higher status than the 'original' from which they were rendered. This is also not the place to explore the very important place of 'Church Language' in Buddhist traditions.

[11] This applies also in, for instance, Chan communities, which in some contexts claim to produce Buddhas, who should be, according to the rhetoric of the tradition, equivalent to the 'historical' Buddha but who, sociologically speaking, always remain in some senses hierarchically subordinate, even while it is their actual (physical) presence which may hold affective precedence.

[12] An approach at least in tune with, if not strictly identical to, the goal of the New Philology.

[13] This is not, it should be emphasized, a repudiation of philological method. As I will endeavor to explain below, it is based on a recognition of the nature of Indian Buddhist scriptural literature and its modes of development. It is still necessary to take account of stemmatic relations of manuscripts or printed editions, for instance, and the suggestion that we need to recognize the inherent equal interest of all phases in the life of a text does not extend to the idea that any copy, no matter how bad, is equally as interesting as any other, or that any edition, no matter how late, is equally as meaningful for understanding the/a tradition as any other. This is also a question that requires careful consideration.

[14] Of course, the text held sacred by a faith community is not necessarily—and probably in fact is rarely—the oldest form of a text—but it must be believed by the community to be so. See below.

have been saying about translation applies rather directly also to questions of the *establishment* of a text to begin with: these are problems of philology in its most basic sense.

Those approaching the question of translation from a faith perspective (using this expression somewhat vaguely to include a range of theoretical and theological stances) generally cannot but imagine that ultimately behind the form or forms in which a text is now available stand (or stood) an authentic original—in the Buddhist case, a record of the Buddha's preaching.[15] An academic approach cannot make this assumption. Moreover, even if one accepts that some revelation stood at the ultimate starting point of extant scriptural transmissions, it is only realistic to conclude that in spite of the best efforts of text critics, the subsequent history of those transmissions places such an *ur*-form forever beyond us. When the situation *seems* less complex—when, as an example, the diverse materials presented concerning at least Indic Mahāyāna *sūtra* materials appear more uniform—the best explanation is likely to be that this unity is instead a result of the violence of tradition, which has eradicated other, more diverse varieties of evidence, not necessarily intentionally of course, but simply through the vagaries of transmission over the centuries.[16]

If it is simply not possible to locate an oldest, most authentic *ur*-form in the first place, both because extant evidence does not permit it and because it is the very nature of Buddhist scriptural literature (due to its possibly originally oral nature, or otherwise) that texts did not develop in a unitary linear fashion, what, then, could be the utility of Chinese and Tibetan translations for studies of scriptures in their Indic context(s)? In other words, if one assumes an archetype, then the collation of extant witnesses should allow some hypothetical reconstruction of this archetype. But if one posits *ab initio* a different sort of nonunitary 'original,' this model cannot apply. Of course, when only a single version—say a single Chinese translation—exists, we have no other choice

[15] I assume this applies mutatis mutandis to tantric literature (perhaps replacing 'the Buddha' with 'a buddha'), but I am not competent to discuss this domain of Buddhist traditions.

[16] In this regard, as in so many others, Buddhist philology is thoroughly in line with Hebrew Bible and New Testament studies, Homeric text criticism and so on.

than to base all we say about a particular text on its unique surviving witness. But given the existence of multiple versions, based on the assumption of the possibility of an archetype, one typical model of making use of primary translations[17] might be termed the triangulation approach: either in the absence of an Indic version, or as another set of coordinates alongside Indic sources, such translations (for instance, into Chinese or Tibetan) might be used to imagine some—however hypothetical—version(s) of an Indic text standing behind the extant witnesses. One does not have to go so far as to call the result an *ur*-text, but to apply this model is at least implicitly to assume the existence of an archetype. It is often asserted that while this method is valid for authored texts, which are generally presumed to have had a single and unique form in the past, the nature of scriptural literature is quite different, and therefore this model is not directly applicable.[18]

I will return to the question of triangulation below, but it is also necessary to mention that assumptions about shared content—commonalities between sources—are what permit the 'correction' of one version by means of another, as for instance when it is asserted that a form found in an Indic source should be altered ('corrected') on the basis of a Tibetan translation. Making a claim such as this brings with it *huge* assumptions concerning the relationship of the two sources, assumptions which are generally not critically examined, or even recognized as assumptions at all. What is to my mind an even more radical version of the same basic pattern occurs when a (modern) translator chooses to render an incomplete source, supplementing missing portions from elsewhere. An example may be the case of a Sanskrit manuscript missing leaves, the missing portions then being translated from 'its' Tibetan translation—although we know full well that the *Vorlage* of

[17] By this expression I mean to exclude, for example, Mongolian translations based on Tibetan translations, and the like. There is some theoretical discussion of 'relay translations,' but most of it is not relevant here, and I am not sure that the term is exactly applicable, while 'retranslation' is perhaps too broad.

[18] I wonder whether even its application to authored literature (roughly, to *śāstra*s, but also *kāvya* and so on) is not open to question, as for instance the growing evidence about the text of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*s of Nāgārjuna seems to suggest (see for example Ye 2007); it appears that variability in śāstric literature might in some cases also present serious challenges to the application of a strictly stemmatic model which assumes the possibility of an archetype.

the Tibetan translation was *not* identical with the extant Sanskrit text. This is a fairly normal procedure in Buddhist Studies, but it is rare indeed that any justification is offered for this mixing (conflating) of sources, which, in light of the critiques I offer here, comes to look more and more problematic.[19]

Translations are of necessity interpretations, implicit commentaries. In the case of traditional Buddhist translations, they present a reading at least differently, and probably in most cases better, informed than our own (better if only in the sense of being generally more deeply and richly traditional). In addition, in so far as translations 'represent' an Indic text, or a recension or version thereof (a ponderous expression we might use to avoid reifying 'the' text), they are witnesses to versions of texts to which we otherwise no longer have access. Finally, when we do have access to both a source and a translation—as we do for example with Tibetan translations from Chinese (Silk 2014)—the translation serves both as a commentary and as a source enabling us to retrovert a more exact form of its own *Vorlage*. An example is the fragmentary Tibetan translation of Kumārajīva's *Amituo jing* (阿彌陀經) translation of the Smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūha*. For this text we have extant Sanskrit manuscripts (and blockprints), a Tibetan translation preserved in the Kanjur (and not strictly parallel to the extant Sanskrit), and two Chinese translations, one of which, that of Kumārajīva, was also translated into Tibetan (roughly two thirds is extant in Pelliot tibétain 785). The transmitted Chinese text of the *Amituo jing*, however, is not invariably literally attested by its Tibetan translation, suggesting at the very least that some version of the Chinese text slightly different from that available to us today may have been the translator's source. What is more, in its function as commentary this translation provides a window onto how the Chinese translation itself was read and understood, minimally, by one educated contemporary reader, in probably 9th century Dunhuang.[20]

In my view, Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptural

[19] I am certainly not the first person to mention this, of course.

[20] The same sort of window can sometimes be provided by commentaries as well, although most Chinese and Tibetan scripture commentaries function on a level of abstraction so far removed from the literal that their utility in this narrow regard is limited.

literature does not conform to the model of a unitary original text; our evidence seems rather to point to multiple simultaneous related 'versions' coexisting. Adding to this the non-systematic methods of translation of not only the Chinese but the Tibetans as well (at least in comparison with the Septuagint—see below), and the variable nature of the vocabulary and grammar of Buddhist Sanskrit and Middle Indic, we must conclude that the situation Buddhist scholars face is not precisely comparable to that discussed by Tov (2000) for Biblical translations, in which he suggests that editors who decline to reconstruct an *ur*-text in Hebrew or Aramaic nevertheless in fact do implicitly offer such a reconstruction when they translate. This may indeed be so in the context of a literature and a translation style, such as that of the Hebrew Bible, that is relatively consistent, grammatically and lexically delimited, and furthermore quite well understood; careful translations in this domain can offer implicit reconstructions of a text—they may serve as an implicit eclectic edition, so to speak. But for our materials, I believe this process simply is not possible (at present, and perhaps theoretically as well). This impossibility may be understood to imply that our own, modern day translations of Buddhist texts are not sufficiently precise, consistent or in fact even thoroughly accurate, since if they were, we might conclude, they would indeed represent their aimed-at (reconstructed) 'original' in a fashion at least more exact that what is presently accomplished. Put another way, if we really believe that the process of triangulation between Chinese, Tibetan and Indic *recovers* something Indic, even if not an *ur*-text, then it should follow that our translation of what is recovered—what is imagined through the guise of the translation(s)—has the same epistemic status as any other recovered source. But it is precisely because we cannot give priority to one source over another that this scenario fails to thoroughly parallel the Biblical case, in which—so it is hypothesized—a single authentic and authoritative text was kept in the Temple in Jerusalem and the goal—or one of the goals—of Biblical text criticism is to produce a text as close as possible to that archetypical version.[21]

[21] The same is often assumed, mutatis mutandis, for the Greek New Testament. This seems likewise to be Martin West's aim with Homer, a quest which, however, is fiercely contested (for instance by Gregory Nagy and Graeme D. Bird).

As Nattier reminds us, if one wants to translate a text, one of the first questions one must ask is, 'which text?' For a modern traditionalist, as for any ancient who might have had the luxury of choosing between sources, the answer may well be, 'that sanctified by tradition,' and there ends the discussion.[22] The evidence for this attitude is generally negative, in the sense that simply no mention is made of sources.[23] At least for a scholar of Indian Buddhism, however, this answer is not available: the virtual disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian heartland in the 13th century implies the absence of any continuous tradition which might sanctify a text.[24] The choice, however, need not, or must not, be entirely arbitrary either. And the only way to avoid arbitrariness is to consider the aims of the translation. This necessitates not only considering for whom one is translating, but also what one wishes to convey with the translation. For once we accept that we can neither reach some original nor (again, in the case of Indian Buddhism) even represent some traditionally sanctified text, what should we do?[25]

A traditional translator's central problem in conveying what the Buddha said might be termed one of negotiating between

[22] This idea is by no means limited to scriptures; an avowed goal of some Homeric text criticism is to recover the text established by Aristarchus and others at the library of Alexandria, for instance.

[23] An example is found in Thomas Cleary's translation of the monumental *Buddhāvataṁsaka* (1984–1987), in which not a single word is devoted to the Chinese source translated therein. In some sectarian translations the sources are those contained in the collected works of the sects, which are themselves 'traditional' rather than scientifically established.

[24] Such texts of course did however continue to be copied and used in Nepal, but at least as modern Buddhist studies has continued to interpret the traditions of the Kathmandu valley, these are seen as belonging to an area outside the Indian heartland. It is a curiosity that in the traditions for which the Pāli canon is sacred, translations have most normally been based on the 'critical' editions of the Pali Text Society, rather than on traditional canons (of Burma, Sri Lanka or the like, for instance). In recent translation initiatives (such as the 84000 project), adherents of 'the' Tibetan tradition have apparently decided that the Derge Kanjur should be treated as the de facto textus receptus, although I am not aware that its primacy is explicitly argued for.

[25] There might be exceptions to the last stricture, as in the case of Pāla period manuscripts, materials indeed written in the Indian heartland and, often, by their materiality bearing witness to the honor in which they were held.

what his sources tell him the Buddha said and what the Buddha might have meant, in so far as he can express the latter in his own idiom, this tension of course not being in any wise unique to Buddhism. Choices must, then, be made between competing possibilities, if for no other than theological reasons. A scholarly translator, in contrast, has generally different goals, including the recovery or reconstruction of forms a given textual presentation may have had in the past (although it is to be confessed that most scholars do not bother to specify precisely which past they have in their sights). Ideally it is not possible, from this perspective, to privilege one form over another, since there is no fixed point which might serve as a frame of reference. While my primary focus here is on the scholarly approach, specifically related to Indic versions of scriptures now known to be extant only in translations in Tibetan and Chinese, it is crucial to simultaneously consider the contrasting paradigm. In the following I consider only a few issues, illustrating them with examples from my own work.

One of the basic problem areas—not, to be sure, limited to Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, but central to their study—concerns vocabulary, since attempting to understand the written products of Buddhist traditions necessitates in the first place control over the vocabulary of the texts under consideration. To understand a text of Indic origin *in its Indic context* (as opposed to how such a text may have been appropriated in China, for instance), it is necessary to reconstruct as far as possible its Indic linguistic shape, at least as far as technical terms are concerned. Toward this end scholars often employ the above-mentioned 'triangulation' between Tibetan, Chinese and Sanskrit (or varieties of Middle Indic). While, as mentioned above, this approach may be suitable for dealing with works such as technical treatises (*śāstra*) or other literature which might reasonably be supposed to have a unique authorship, since the language of these texts may be *relatively* regular and formulaic (especially, it is thought, in Tibetan, or when rendered in Chinese by the school of Xuanzang), serious problems arise when we are dealing instead with scriptural literature (*sūtra*).

To begin with the most obvious, we have to face the well-known issue of the irregularity of translation equivalents, even in Tibetan after the establishment of the *Mahāvyutpatti*, although certainly its use went a long way toward imposing a set of standards (though often *not* one-to-one correspondences). Even

more serious, however, is the fluidity of the Indic source texts themselves. Although I present these as if they were two separate issues, in practice they are so intimately connected that one cannot be discussed without the other. Moreover, these questions confront us not only when we are dealing with ancient materials; they come back in nearly the same form as we attempt to translate ancient texts into modern languages.

Recognition of this problem is not new, of course. One particularly clear expression is found in Richard Robinson's review of Étienne Lamotte's French translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in which, while characterizing the work as (1966: 150) "philologically the most adequate treatment of a major Mahāyāna sūtra to appear in a modern language," and labeling it "a milestone in Buddhist scholarship and in essential respects a model for future translators," Robinson went on not only to point out lapses—which are to be expected in the work of any human being—but also to question such common practices as the reconstruction of Sanskrit terms. Regarding these terms, he wrote (1966: 151), "If they are for the benefit of the reader who knows Buddhist Sanskrit, then the French translations are unnecessary. The Sanskrit terms are of little use to anyone else." He goes on to suggest that in the absence of a uniform European Buddhist terminology, as he calls it, for a translator like Lamotte who uses his translation equivalents regularly, a glossary should suffice. In addition, Robinson points out that many of Lamotte's restorations are questionable. Without going into detail here, I would suggest that when terms occur in other than regular contexts, it is probably impossible to restore them with confidence; I will return to this below.

Robinson offers (1966: 152) the solution of preparing two versions of a translation, "one using the standard vocabulary of the target language enriched by arbitrarily fixed equivalents for technical terms and the other employing the grammar of the target language but Sanskrit vocabulary insofar as it can be reconstituted. The first version would be for the general reader, and the second would be for the Buddhologist." He takes up as an example the following from Lamotte (§III.38):

> Révérend (bhadanta) Rāhula, tu es le fils du Bienheureux et, ayant renoncé à la royauté d'un roi qui fait tourner la roue (cakravartirājya), tu es sorti du monde (pravrajita). Quels sont, à ton avis, les qualités (guṇa) et les avantages (anuśaṃsa) de la sortie

du monde (pravrajyā)?"

As alternatives to this rendering, Robinson then offers the two following possibilities:

Version I (for 'general readers'):

> Révérend Rāhula, tu es le fils du Bienheureux et, ayant renoncé à la royauté d'un roi qui fait tourner la roue, tu es sorti du monde. Quels sont, à ton avis, les qualités et les avantages de la sortie du monde?

Version II (for 'Buddhologists'):

> Bhadanta Rāhula, tu es le fils du Bhagavant et, ayant renoncé le cakravartirājya, tu es pravrajita. Quels sont, à ton avis, les guṇa et les anuśaṁsa de la pravrajyā?

Robinson has made some assumptions here which it is worthwhile to discuss. In the first place, although Robinson does not seem to credit it, there are specialists in Buddhist Studies who are not completely at home in Sanskrit, and for them his Version II would be well nigh incomprehensible. A second assumption seems to be that a real translation cannot be sufficiently precise to satisfy the specialist. But what is the putative 'general reader' meant to expect, if not an accurate translation? And what does the specialist need beyond this? If we are talking—as used to be done decades ago—about making available in Sanskrit materials now thought to be lost, but preserved for instance in Tibetan, then there should be no objection to following the path of Tucci and others and *translating* into Sanskrit (in Tucci's case, avowedly for the benefit of Indian pandits who might be interested in Buddhist works).[26] This is quite a different thing from *restoring* a lost Sanskrit text, a practice rightly scorned by Regamey (1938: 10) as "a rather useless amusement." Even if we think that some of our colleagues who might not, for instance, read Tibetan or Chinese might nevertheless like to read a text preserved only in Tibetan and/or Chinese translation, Robinson's version II seems to me hardly a viable solution.

[26] As in Tucci 1929. I dare say, however, that few such persons exist today, and even those who do are not likely to be very interested in *sūtra*s. In a parallel to this, and for the same reasons, I find the decisions of the Vienna project editing Sanskrit manuscripts from China to present their editions not in analytically preferable romanization but instead in Devanāgarī very difficult to understand.

Let us go back to the passage upon which Robinson commented. The now published Sanskrit reads: *tvaṁ rāhula tasya bhagavataḥ putraś cakravartirājyam utsṛjya pravrajitaḥ tatra ke te pravrajyāyā guṇānuśaṁsāḥ |*.[27] Lamotte's reconstructions of technical terms from Tibetan are fully confirmed here, suggesting that in this key respect the extant Sanskrit text and the source of the Tibetan translation—but let us remember that this Sanskrit manuscript was preserved in Tibet!—corresponded. *But*: all three Chinese translations, those of Zhi Qian, Kumārajīva and Xuanzang, suggest that in the phrase "fils du Bhagavant" instead of the *bhagavant* suggested by the Tibetan (*bcom ldan 'das kyi sras*), their exemplars *may* have had instead *buddha*, since they read 汝佛之子, which *appears* to render 'you [are a] son of the Buddha.' Or—and this is not trivial—Zhi Qian's version may have had *buddha*, and he was reverentially followed or copied by the two later translators. Or, to further complicate matters, as is commonly but not consistently the case for Zhi Qian, the word *we* understand to regularly represent *buddha*, namely *fó* 佛, may rather have been meant to render *bhagavant*.[28] However—and now the situation becomes even muddier still—it does not seem ever to have been the case for Kumārajīva or Xuanzang that in their own original translations (as opposed to cases in which they carry over elements from earlier translations) *fó* 佛 served as a legitimate rendering of *bhagavant*. If Kumārajīva and Xuanzang indeed copied Zhi Qian here (which seems beyond doubt), this very act of copying had the result of transforming the meaning of what was copied, because the signification of the key word—*in Chinese*—had changed over time. Although such echoing, if we may call it that, of earlier translations is not at all uncommon, it has yet to be systematically studied.[29] As

[27] Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature 2006: 31. By using the definite article "the" Sanskrit I do not mean to imply any belief in the existence of a unique Sanskrit recension of the text.

[28] Nattier 2003: 234.

[29] I am not aware of systematic studies of the ways in which later translators took over and modified earlier Chinese translations, but inter alia such research would of course be essential for a correct appreciation of the independent value of such translations. It is better known that Tibetan translations of works which quote scripture (Indian *śāstra*s) often utilize pre-existing translations instead of retranslating the quotations anew (Seyfort Ruegg 1973), and this too is of potential significance for our understanding of the form and history of Indian

a phenomenon, however, it has of course important implications for the use we might make of Chinese translations.

How might we resolve the problems implicit in the textual questions raised above? The short answer is that we cannot. Does this mean, as some have claimed—often those who cannot read Chinese, let it be noted—that Chinese translations are not reliable guides to Indian sources (for us today, as they were not for Chinese historically)? An answer to this hinges on what one expects out of translation. If we are aware that having *some* Sanskrit source does not mean we have access to *the* Indian text, the gap between translation and 'original' suddenly seems to shrink significantly.

To reiterate, the basic principle of what I above referred to as the method of triangulation is that, in the absence of Indic language 'originals,' we can reconstruct terminology on the basis of independent Tibetan and Chinese translations; when they agree in pointing toward some Indic source term, we can speculate that this term stood in the common source from which these Chinese and Tibetan translations were independently produced. And indeed, this often seems to be successful, with speculations confirmed by parallels in other texts and contexts or by discoveries of Indic manuscripts. However, I am not aware of any case in which we know ourselves to be in possession of the original manuscript of a Mahāyāna *sūtra* from which an available Tibetan or Chinese translation was made.[30] Therefore, from a positivist point of view, it is not possible to be certain what *Vorlage* stood before the eyes of any given translator, despite the confidence we might be willing to place in the process of, as some Biblical scholars term it, retroversion. But the problem is even more serious.

How do we establish that we are dealing with 'the same text,' and even if we establish this, by fiat (that is, without any method to justify this assertion more rigorous than 'It seems the same to me'), what do we do when the different versions—readable and understandable in themselves—disagree with each other? There are a number of ways in which this problem might

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scriptures, since the presence of identical quotations can unhistorically give the impression of a greater uniformity in the textual tradition than was actually the case.

[30] For an example of a tantric text for which this seems however to be the case, see Fan 2008.

manifest itself in an obvious and practical, rather than a purely theoretical and hypothetical, vein. To give only a simple example, the *Kāśyapaparivarta* (a title, incidentally, which may never have been used in India) falls easily into a number of logical paragraphs, recognized by its modern editor and already by its classical commentary (attributed to *Sthiramati—another problem!).[31] The versions available to us in Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese (more than one in each language!) correspond rather closely on the whole regarding content, but sometimes arrange the order of the sections differently. As editors we may choose to treat this diverse material diplomatically, editing a number of versions in parallel and noting their divergences; that is, we may renounce the idea of offering an edition of 'the' *sūtra* which superordinates a single version and correspondingly subordinates all others as 'variants' of 'the' text. However, as translators, what should we do? Should we renounce the idea of translating "the text" on the grounds that there is no such thing, that is, that all that exists are multiple texts, none inherently superior? If we choose this path, we meet a fundamental philosophical question: if there is no such thing as "the text," what allows us to treat the diverse sources we have as versions of 'the' text, that is, as the *same*—according to us now, nonexistent—text at all?[32] What allows us, moreover, to correct or at all alter one version on the basis of another? One option would be to privilege one version, to take it as a base text, but then, on what basis? As one can see, the theoretical problems pile up rather quickly.

This is where, in an American idiom, the rubber meets the road: the very nature of Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, in my opinion, precludes the establishment of a historical *ur*-text, which means that the very idea of aiming at the/an 'original' text is illusory. These facts taken

[31] Respectively Staël-Holstein 1926, 1933. The text in Indian sources seems always to have been referred to as *Ratnakūṭa*. I spoke about this problem in a subsequent conference also held in Hamburg, in August, 2015, in a presentation titled "Sthiramati and the Question of the Authorship of the Commentary to the *Kāśyapaparivarta* (*Ratnakūṭa*): A Comparison with Passages in the *Madhyāntavibhāga-ṭīkā* Citing the *Sūtra*."

[32] This question is raised in the context of the identity of early Chinese philosophical texts by Boltz 2007: 476–477, who wonders, for instance, why a text whose traditionally transmitted version shares no more than 40% of its content with a version found in an early tomb burial should nevertheless—more or less automatically—be considered the same text.

together should shake our faith in the power, and in the validity, of triangulation. Of course, this is not to deny that it often seems convincing, in the sense that extant Tibetan and Chinese translations point to a common (usually no longer extant) source. And this postulation of a common *Vorlage* may in fact often be valid, in the sense that indeed elements are shared between the respective sources of, for instance, extant Tibetan and Chinese translations of a given work. But in a great many cases—probably the majority—we have extremely limited sources at our disposal, and in the face of what seems to have been a fair degree of textual fluidity in Indic language sources this very limitation, by restricting the variability of the available and visible textual record, gives the impression of more uniformity than we are justified in assuming existed historically. The paucity of extant evidence, in other words, should not lead us to believe that the actual history of a text is only as complex as it looks today.

I mentioned above that retroversion or reconstruction is hazardous in anything other than formulaic situations, but in fact, even in such cases, it is fraught with danger, for the variability of Buddhist scripture reaches even into the formulaic. Whether such variability always 'makes a difference', and on what level, may be another question. As a simple example, what shall we do with the very first formulaic clause in a *sūtra*? Is it *evaṁ mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye* (as our textsbooks without exception tell us)—or does the phrase read rather *ekasamayaṁ*? Or is it *ekaṁ samayaṁ*? All forms are well attested in Indic manuscripts. A translator is perhaps not overly troubled by this, since an appropriate translation that covers all the cases may suffice—or does it? Is it 'at one time' or 'on one occasion' or 'on the one occasion that I have heard …'? We notice here that the formula does not use the word *kāla*, which is perhaps the most normal Sanskrit and Pāli word for 'time', but instead *samaya*, which (elsewhere?) could be normally rendered 'occasion.' What should it mean to us as translators and as interpreters that the Tibetans and Chinese used 'normal' words for 'time' (*dus*, and *shi* 時) in their own formulaic translations, while they may also render *samaya* differently (for example with *tshe*, or *hui* 會, *hou* 候, etc.)? This leads us to one of the questions I promised would be central to these remarks: what are we reading, and thus translating, when we work with translations in Tibetan or Chinese? Are we attempting to render the source text from which we imagine the

translation to have been made (that is, is our translation a reconstruction in Tov's sense)? How can we do this if we cannot retrovert, and we know that we can at very best only retrovert technical terms and formulae? Are we content, then, rather to aim at a rendering of the understanding of a, let us say, 5th-century Chinese translator? But then, by what stretch of the imagination can we justifiably translate the—imagined—Indic terminology lying behind certain terms, amidst the remaining sea of Chinese? What we inevitably end up with if we follow this course is neither fish nor fowl (and ultimately the situation is probably not very much better in Tibetan).

As if all of this were not yet enough, we know that both translators and scribes make mistakes. Originals (of whatever form) contain mistakes, traditional translations contain mistakes, and our own translations contain mistakes. Concerning the last category, there is not much to be said: we simply need to assist and to critique each other, and have faith that things will be improved by improved knowledge and by the process of revision. But what should we do—as editors, but perhaps even more importantly, as translators—with mistakes from the past? A good example comes from the *Ratnarāśisūtra*, in which four times in the Tibetan translation we have *'jig rten pha rol tu kha na ma tho bas 'jigs par lta ba*, attested in Sanskrit in a quotation from the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* (in my 1994 edition, §I.14) as *paralokāvadyabhayadarśi(n)*, "fearful of censure in the other world," or more literally "being one who sees [or: does not see] the danger which will result in the other world from even the smallest faults." The (formulaic) expression is quite clear, and refers to the need for vigilance with regard to even (seemingly) minor instances of behavior, in light of their future karmic consequences. At §III.15 the Chinese has only (*bu*) *weihoushi* (不) 畏後世, "(does not) fear the other world." This rendering is not inspired, but it is reasonably understandable. However, §I.14 and §IV.1 render *wei yu houshi yuru jingang* 畏於後世, 喻如金剛, "fearful of the other world, for instance, like a *vajra*," while §VII.24 has (*bu*) *jian houshi guowu yuru jingang* (不) 見後世過惡, 喻如金剛, "(does not) see the evil of sin in the other world, for instance, like a *vajra*."[33]

[33] One might argue that for Chinese *houshi* 後世 'afterlife' is better than 'other world,' raising questions of how much one should try to look through the Chinese toward some Indic original.

The Chinese translation contains an obvious error caused, I believe, by misunderstanding a term in Middle Indic, *vajra* < **vaja* < *vadya*. If we were to translate the Chinese version, should we feel obligated to render the readable—but nonetheless, from one perspective, clearly 'wrong'—text as it stands?[34] If we choose to correct it, on the other hand, when do we draw the line? Do we correct every sort of perceived error? On what basis should we do this? And if we do, what results from this? Does this bring us closer to some original? If it does, it simultaneously removes us from the text which belonged, and continues to belong, to actual Buddhist communities; do we not then create a text which had no life in any Buddhist community?

Another example: in the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta* (in my 2015 edition, §15i), we find the expression 住於彼岸清淨法中, "dwells among the pure *dharma*s of the other shore." We are fortunate to have a corresponding Sanskrit expression, quoted in the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, *paramapariśuddhadharmatāyāṁ sthitaḥ,* "fixed in the Absolute Reality [*dharmatā*] that is ultimately pure," which makes better sense, and the difference can be relatively easily explained: the Chinese *sūtra* translator Bodhiruci seems to have misunderstood *parama* as *pāramitā*, either because he misread his source, or because his source already had this (mis)reading. Therefore, in place of Bodhiruci's "dwells among the pure *dharma*s of the other shore"—which, it should be noted, is perfectly understandable—what may have been *meant* is rather "dwells in the Absolute Reality [*dharmatā*] that is ultimately pure," or something along those lines. If I am translating the Chinese text—and this *sūtra* exists as a whole only in Chinese, so I have no other choice—should I *correct* the translator? If I do, what am I translating? I can hardly claim to be translating the Indic *Vorlage* if in most other cases (and less than half the text is available in Sanskrit) I have only Bodhiruci's translation available, and thus no way to see beyond other possible instances of grammatical and readable, but potentially wrong, renderings. And if I am willing to go so far as correcting his meaning, why don't I go all the way and rewrite the Chinese?[35]

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[34] This is in fact precisely what was done in Chang 1983: 286, 296, 311, probably because the underlying expression was not recognized.

[35] Lozang Jamspal in fact did precisely this in some places in his Tibetan edition

Another passage (§21ii) in the same *sūtra* reads: 舍利弗, 此人以起二見因緣故, 從冥入冥, 從闇入闇。我説是等名'一闡提'. Here the corresponding Sanskrit quotation has *tān ahaṁ śāriputra tamasas tamo 'ntaram andhakārān mahāndhakāragāminas tamobhūyiṣṭhāḥ* |. The Chinese can be rendered: "Because these people, Śāriputra, entertain these two views, from obscurity they enter obscurity, from darkness they enter darkness. I speak of these terming them '*icchantika*.'" The whole second sentence—perfectly grammatical and coherent in itself—has nevertheless no equivalent in Sanskrit, and since I judge it incompatible with the *sūtra*'s otherwise expressed theology (a position I argue for in the Introduction to my edition), I conclude that the translation process somehow introduced the clause about the *icchantika* into an original which lacked it. Shall I therefore remove it from my translation, and if so, upon what grounds would I make such a change? Once again, what would I be translating if I manipulated the core source text in this manner?

Space permits brief consideration of only one more interesting problem for a translator, this concerning how to deal, once again, with specific vocabulary, but in this case vocabulary which is clearly intentionally polyvalent. Texts contain ambiguities, and depending on the form in which we find such ambiguities we might be willing to decide that these are intentional, and not merely artifacts of our own inadequate knowledge and understanding. Sometimes we label such things 'word play,' or in German *Wortspiel*, but I do not know a precise word for the type of non-humorous word play I refer to here. An excellent example comes once again from the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta*, although precisely the same thing is found elsewhere.[36] The central notion of this text revolves around the *sattvadhātu*, a term which means—to be reductionistic about it—both the realm or extent of living beings (how many beings there are in existence) and the essence or quintessence of living beings. Let us look at four passages in the

of the *Bodhisattvagocaropāyaviṣayavikurvāṇanirdeśa*; see Silk 2013.

[36] An extreme example of the same form of paronomasia is evident in a passage in the *Suvikrāntavikrāmiparipṛcchā*, for which see Hikata 1958: 14,20–15,24. This is translated in the Introduction to my edition of the *Anūnatvāpūrṇatvanirdeśaparivarta*.

order in which they appear in the *sūtra*:[37]

> A) 世尊, 此衆生聚、衆生海爲有增減, 爲無增減, "World-honored One! Does this mass of beings, this ocean of beings, undergo increase and decrease, or does it not undergo increase and decrease?"
>
> B) 舍利弗, 大邪見者: 所謂, 見衆生界增, 見衆生界減, "It is a greatly mistaken view, Śāriputra, to see the realm of beings as increasing or to see the realm of beings as decreasing."
>
> C) 舍利弗, 此二種見依止一界, 同一界, 合一界。一切愚癡凡夫不如實知彼一界故, 不如實見彼一界故, 起於極惡大邪見心, 謂: 衆生界增, 謂: 衆生界減, "These two views, Śāriputra, rely on the single realm, are the same as the single realm, are united with the single realm. Because all foolish common people do not know that single realm in accord with reality, because they do not see that single realm in accord with reality, they entertain ideas of extremely evil greatly mistaken views, that is, that the realm of beings increases or that the realm of beings decreases."
>
> D) 是故, 舍利弗, 不離衆生界有法身, 不離法身有衆生界。衆生界即法身。法身即衆生界。舍利弗, 此二法者, 義一名異, found also in Sanskrit: *tasmāc chāriputra nānyaḥ sattvadhātur nānyo dharmakāyaḥ | sattvadhātur eva dharmakāyaḥ | dharmakāya eva sattvadhātuḥ | advayam etad arthena | vyañjanamātrabhedaḥ* |, "Therefore, Śāriputra, there is no quintessence of beings separate from the dharma-body, there is no dharma-body separate from the quintessence of beings. The quintessence of beings is precisely the dharma-body, the dharma-body is precisely the quintessence of beings. These two things, Śāriputra, have one meaning; [only] the names differ."

In this text the term *dhātu*—realm/quintessence—contextually undergoes a shift in meaning as the text goes on to link this *sattvadhātu* with *dharmadhātu*, a term which could be rendered as 'dharma realm' but equally well as 'quintessence of dharma', although neither rendering is terribly meaningful on its own. In passage A, the key technical term is not used and the mass of beings is expressed differently (the underlying Sanskrit is not clear). The second passage B introduces the *sattvadhātu* as the realm of beings, the domain containing all beings (thus functionally

[37] In my edition §§2d, 3iia , 8iia–c, 15ii = Johnston 1950: 41.15–17.

equivalent to the entirety of *saṁsāra*). While the sense of the key term in passage C remains ambiguous, D has gone all the way toward another sense of *dhātu*. However, while we can well accept that he understood the intent of the *sūtra*, the Chinese translator chose to render *dhātu* with the same Chinese term throughout (*jie* 界). Doubtless he struggled with the choice between rendering the shifting meaning, and thus losing verbal connection, on the one hand, or retaining the verbal connection at the price of a translation which, we should probably conclude, is not meaningful as Chinese, since the resultant Chinese translation *jie* does not, naturally, share the semantic range of its source term *dhātu*.

There are many questions here, but precious few answers. It is indeed the case that classical (in the senses of premodern, 'canonized,' and so on) translations can be of great assistance to the modern translator in a variety of ways, not the least of which is in bringing to the fore the existence of multiple versions of a text, and thereby challenging the very notion of *the* text and *its* translation in the first place. Moreover, for most Indian Buddhist Mahāyāna literature, at present we have access only through such translations, and thus their study is essential. Can we, however, take away anything positive and helpful from this discussion? Can we extract some guidelines useful for a translator? I believe that the 'deconstruction' of the notion of a unitary text, and the challenges posed by the types of complications discussed or mentioned above, in fact are of great use to translators, in the first place because they compel any translator to think careful and explicitly about his or her source text, on the one hand, and the status of the result of a modern translation on the other. There is no correct stance toward either of these poles, but only a demand for awareness. As in almost any relationship, honesty is the key to communication, and we should expect nothing less from ourselves as editors and translators. When we make explicit our choices, we prepare the ground for our readers to approach the results of our work with greater appreciation and with clearer expectations. This, in the end, may be the very best we can ever expect.

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