

# Talking to Myself

KHENPO NGAWANG PALZANG



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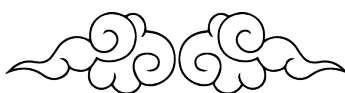
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By Khenpo Ngawang Palzang

Translated by Dr. Joseph McClellan



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TALKING TO MYSELF

By Khenpo Ngawang Palzang

Emaho! These days, here in the bowels of the degenerate age,  
The rulership of karma drags me where I don't want to go.  
This weighs on my mind, but still, I spurn the Dharma.

No matter what I go on about, it doesn't mean much.  
In my heart, I'd like to be a part of the Dharma,  
But a fathomless sea of bad karma swells all around me.

With all this triviality, I've made a fool of myself and others.  
Strangled by the straps of the eight delusions,<sup>1</sup>  
Here where the five poisons rage, I have betrayed everyone, high and low.

I know that partaking in the Dharma heals,  
And I want to wrap myself in the fine cloths of study and practice.  
But these thoughts, like foul vomit gurgling within me,  
Haunt me with the unthinkability of my path pleasing the buddhas.

In these times, study and practice have all the appeal of a corpse.  
I have remained in solitude, but nothing meaningful came of it.  
Pretending to be an altruistic practitioner,  
My mind buzzes with schemes embroiling me and others.

To me the teachings of sūtra and tantra are mere commodities  
I blithely traffic to get ahead in this world.  
What will become of me in future lives?

My entourage of students serves me again and again,<sup>2</sup>  
And I fritter away my life, worthlessly,  
Days and nights passing on a wheel of distractions.

The life stories of my fathers, the Kagyu saints,  
Speak straight to my heart,  
But I only pretend to relate to their hardships.

I pose and I lie, talented in my treachery.  
Straggling behind the forefathers,  
I'm an orphan lost among the images of my mind.



Sad at the decay of my body's four elements,  
And cut off from the Dharma's stream, my heart feels dark.

I'm oppressed by the burden of my self-absorption,  
And I long to rest in selflessness.  
But unseeing clouds my mind, so I don't make sense of the path.

I stumble around in my distortions.  
After thoughts, I scramble helplessly,  
And I'm full of hopes and fears about keeping up appearances.

Being in charge of a bastion of the teachings is a demonic fate.  
These activities, like rapids, I try to manage.  
All these undertakings, and I'm still a bastard to the basic truths.  
All this fellowship, and I just wallow in quarrels.

My sojourns in solitude have been ruts of distraction.  
Ungrounded, I sway in the winds of the wealthy.<sup>3</sup>

How I really am remains a mystery to me.  
My appearance is finely wrought, but I'm fooling myself.  
The hypocrisy inside me will fuel my future miseries.  
These toxic deeds I've heaped up under the cover of Dharma.<sup>4</sup>

I aspire for noble qualities, then I deceive.  
Though I'm getting older, I don't think about death.  
Lacking all sense of direction, empty-handed, I creak along.  
Who will save me from terror on the Lord of Death's road?

The drive to shelter from fear is rooted in my mind.<sup>5</sup>  
I'm drunk on the poison draft of bettering my lot,<sup>6</sup>  
And if I don't serve nectar that helps others,  
The Dharma I take part in will just be filler for this life.

Now, no matter what I think about,  
My mind finds nothing to trust.  
So let me turn my mind inward and stop looking around!  
Let me integrate the practices that have come down through the lineage!

I've collected things of value, but I can't take them with me.  
I've indulged in gathering up my desires,  
And I got them, sure, but all I came away with was toxic burdens.

I scramble like some Sisyphean slave,<sup>7</sup>  
And my hard man image is wrapped up in the eight delusions.  
What hope can I hold for anything down the line?

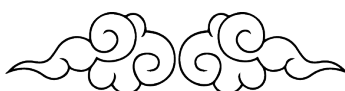


Betrayed by my benighted mind, I'm dull and thick.  
I stuff myself with meaningless likes and dislikes,  
And while I understand that enemies are endless, still I strive to quell them.

I know I can't rely on friends, yet I bind myself in attachment to them.  
I've managed to get everything wrong about what is vast and profound,<sup>8</sup>  
And though I'm good at masquerading as a teacher, I'm steeped in laziness.

Surrounded by the appearances of this life, reflect on the implications of your thoughts.<sup>9</sup>  
See if there is any benefit in my babble.  
Take good stock of the way I am.  
If you think I'm on to something, then practice.  
If you think, "I am not afraid of the great enemy of the lower realms,"  
Then feel free to take it easy.

*May some good come from "talking to myself."*<sup>10</sup>



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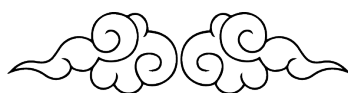
Joseph McClellan produced a draft of the translation and appendix during the summer of 2022 in Mae Sot, Thailand. Lowell Cook then checked the translation against the Tibetan and made many corrections and improvements. Ryan Jacobson reviewed a second draft and Tom Greensmith offered final copyedits. Thanks to Khentrul Lodro Thaye Rinpoche for some helpful comments.

## APPENDIX

## ON THE METHODOLOGY OF THE TRANSLATION

In the translation of this poem, we used a methodology much less common in translated Tibetan literature. Most of this literature is doctrinally rich, and often it conveys subtle contemplative instructions that a translator must take great care to pass along to the reader with precision. Other translated Tibetan literature, such as the tremendous work of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, strives to preserve the style, register, and even syntax of the original text as much as possible, even if it sometimes goes against the grain of English literary conventions. The consensus is that more literal translations—*metaphrase* in translation parlance—are better for preserving the texts as historical documents. At least as important as that, Tibetan translators usually approach their work with an attitude of devotion—they try to tread as lightly as possible on the fabric of sacred words laid before them.

Writers of Khenpo Ngaga's stature, and Khenpo Ngaga himself, usually write from a position of explicit or implicit authority—an authority that comes from the partial or complete accomplishment of the Buddhist path. Khenpo's autobiography, *Wondrous Dance of Illusion*, recounts a nearly endless stream of spiritual insights going back to his early childhood, and many of his writings are in the voice of a master in total control of his life and mind and who is writing for the reader's benefit—to teach us something about view, meditation, or action. Therefore, most of his work should be translated according to the principles of metaphrase. While translating this poem, however, metaphrase did not seem adequate, or even appropriate.



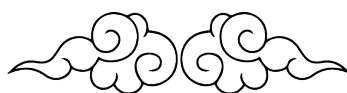
This is not the place to speculate on Khenpo Ngaga's motives in writing this poem, but based on his life story, if he ever felt the way he describes here, it may surprise many of us. Whatever the case, the poem is striking for its tone of self-excoriation, regret, and melancholy—the kind of depression that torments a person who has the embers of a seeker in their heart but nevertheless has wasted their life and spiritual opportunities. The poem is almost devoid of technical terminology, and it does not present precise contemplative instructions. Rather, Khenpo Ngaga here uses affect as a hammer. The poem's sole purpose seems to be to exacerbate the reader's existential darkness—to strike on the hopelessness of being happy doing what one has always done.

Considering these elements of the poem's content and style, we offer a *paraphrastic* translation—that is, we do not contort the translation to fit the syntax and grammatical details of the original. The poem, as strange as it may sound, is far closer to Hank William's *I'm so Lonesome I Could Cry* than to Khenpo's own prayers and instructions. Even if the poem is a performance of a bodhisattva mimicking the thoughts of the saṃsārically afflicted, Khenpo Ngaga has succeeded in writing something many of us find painfully familiar. His "Talking to Myself" sounds just like our own pain and frustration.

To give a few examples of the paraphrastic approach of the translation: Line three begins with the clause *don gong ltar bsam kyang chos ma mthun* (lit. meaning + above + like + think + but + Dharma + not + agree). A simple and accurate literal translation would be, "I think about the aforementioned meaning, however, I do not conform to the Dharma." But no one would find that English line elegant or interesting, and the warmth of an English poem must not be cooled because of a half-line of stock phrasing. Tibetan verse, on the other hand, with its austere meter and elided particles, tolerates and even thrives when a chain of simple syllables forces the reader to fill in the gaps with their imagination. The point of the line is to highlight what he just said about feeling the negative consequences of his previous actions and the absurdity of refusing to engage in the one thing that would make the situation better—Dharma practice. For this reason, in lieu of a literal translation, we opted for the more evocative, "This weighs on my mind, but still, I spurn the Dharma."

The Tibetan of another line on the first page says *dus deng song gi bshad sgrub ro ltar mthong* ("these days + of + study + practice + corpse + like + to see"). A literal but unsatisfying rendering of this might say, "The study and practice of these days look like a corpse." That will not do aesthetically, so we must ask what it means to look like a corpse. Of course, this means it looks like something you want nothing to do with, something you would rather leave by the road and forget about. Thus, we ended up with "In these times, study and practice have all the appeal of a corpse." Tibetan has every resource to articulate that exact English thought, but to our ear, the correspondence here is adequate, and no meaningful violence has been done to the original.

Again, on the first page, there is a couplet in which nauseating thoughts or concepts rise up (we say "gurgling," but in fact there is only implied verbal action)—these thoughts (*rtog pa*) are in the instrumental case, so they are the agent or the reason for the verb, which comes at the end of a Tibetan sentence. The verb here is "to think" or "wonder" (*snyam pa*), so the basic logic of the sentence is "because of these thoughts ... I think." But again, this will not do aesthetically, and there is nothing technical in the couplet that would demand a high degree of literal precision. If we focus on the affective meaning, we may consider how we speak about specific thought patterns that crystallize around dark and negative thoughts. We might say something like, "I am *haunted* by the memories of my child's death." While that is not a common





idiom in classical Tibetan, it conveys the feeling much better than the metaphrastic “thoughts ... make me think.”

A bit later, another line solicits a loose rendering. The Tibetan says, “toxic deeds + big + those + Dharma + in + accumulated + is.” The sticking point is interpreting the preposition in relation to “Dharma.” The general meaning is “accumulated/gathered/heaped up *in* the Dharma,” but that English is ambiguous. We take “in” as “*in the context of* the Dharma,” but we still must unpack intent. If one heaps up toxic deeds in the context of the Dharma, the main problem is the hypocrisy of acting destructively under the false banner/aegis/cover of the Dharma. Therefore, we end up with a loose translation we think captures the meaning better than any literal option: “These toxic deeds I’ve heaped up under the cover of Dharma.”

A final, simple example regards the handling of probably the most common Tibetan adjective, *chen po*. It can cover every synonym of the fundamental English adjectives “big” and “great.” In one line of this poem, the common term *mtsho chen* appears, which means, unambiguously, “big lake/ocean.” The main verb in the line is *rdol ba*, which has the water-related meaning of “flood” or “burst,” which nudges us to choose a water-related adjective for “big.” We, therefore, opt for “fathomless,” even though there are Tibetan words that match that adjective’s etymology. Since the vocabulary being used is not doctrinal or technical, we see no reason to limit our diction to the less poetic options.

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1 “Eight delusions” here stands for the “eight worldly concerns,” the false paths of basing one’s happiness on gain and loss, feeling good and not good, praise and censure, and recognition and insignificance.

2 We have speculatively amended *kyi* to *kyis* in this line. This is the most common Tibetan orthographical error, and the instrumental case *kyis* reads more smoothly.

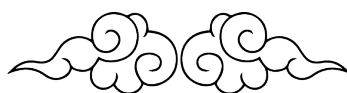
3 Most likely referring to the tendency to gravitate towards one’s wealthy benefactors who make one’s life comfortable.

4 A loose rendering of the line. Please see the appendix for an explanation of the translation choices.

5 We have amended the spelling in this line from *chag* to *chags*. Additionally, “the motivation to the sheltered from fear” (*jigs skyobs kyi kun slong*) is one of two main flawed motivations for pursuing the spiritual path. In Khenpo Ngaga’s own *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, he glosses this motivation in the following way: “If you practice the Dharma in order to be protected from the fear of being prey in this life to disease, negative spirits, being punished by the law, famine, and so forth, whether you follow the most basic practices of the Shravakas’ Vehicle or the most advanced practices of the Radiant Great Perfection, you may well be protected from these fears, but apart from this there will be no beneficial result whatsoever. You should therefore avoid this sort of attitude” (Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, 18).

6 “The attitude of wishing to better one’s lot” (*legs smon gyi kun slong*) is the second main wrong motivation for spiritual practice. Khenpo Ngaga glosses it the following way: “you may think, ‘I will request a teaching and receive the empowerments and the transmissions, and then, if I practice the sadhana in retreat, I’ll gain something; people will praise me and I’ll become famous.’ With these three—gain, praise, and a good reputation—you can obtain food, clothes, and other sources of happiness for this life. Gain, praise, fame, and pleasure, and their four opposites, which are the things we do not wish for, together constitute the eight ordinary concerns... nothing on earth could be more shameful than using the Dharma to fulfill your worldly desires. Someone who does so, exchanging the priceless teachings of the sacred Dharma for worldly valuables and goods like food and clothes, is worse than an ordinary old man who gets rich hunting with a rifle. The peerless Dagpo said: ‘Unless you practice the Dharma according to the Dharma, Dharma itself becomes the cause of evil rebirths.’... It is said in the Sakya teaching *Parting from the Four Attachments*, ‘Those who are attached to this life are not practitioners of the Dharma.’ Such people are traders in the soul of the doctrine, people who demean the Three Jewels, mere collectors of monastic robes. You should avoid them like poison.

“When you have this sort of motivation, hoping to better your lot, you might appear to be practicing the Dharma, whether the most basic Shravakas’ Vehicle or the most advanced Great Perfection; you might lock yourself up in your hermitage for many years; you might look as if you are diligently practicing sadhana in





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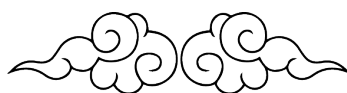
retreat; but, according to Apu, even if you acquire some wealth, praise, or a good reputation the only thing you will accomplish is being able to say, ‘It is because of my practice that I am rich, much-praised, and famous.’ You will not even sow the seed for liberation in the next life. Like the swindler who spread a deerskin over some donkey meat to sell it as venison, you will have covered the donkey meat of your own evil being with the deerskin of the sacred Dharma; you will have discredited the Dharma. Just as one says of an ordinary person who squanders his inheritance, ‘He’s a hopeless businessman,’ people will say of you, ‘There is someone who has failed and discredited the Dharma.’” (Ngawang Pelzang, *A Guide to the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, 18–19).

7 Here, “Sisyphian” is rendering *don med*, a general term meaning “pointless/useless/meaningless.” Sisyphian relates to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to roll a boulder up a mountain repeatedly. Once he pushed the boulder to the top, it would roll back over him to the bottom, and he would have to repeat the process, eternally. Albert Camus wrote a popular essay about the myth, which he saw as an apt metaphor for the absurdity of human existence, where much of what we do is difficult, repetitive, and seemingly pointless. While we generally avoid specific Western references in Tibetan translations, here we use “Sisyphian” because of its common usage, and because it captures the contextual meaning quite well.

8 This is a reference to the “two commentarial traditions” according to which Mahāyāna treatises are organized. “Profound” here refers to the path of the profound view of emptiness inspired by the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and transmitted to and expounded by Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka philosophers. “Vast” here refers to the path of vast conduct taught by Maitreya to Asaṅga and carried on through the activities of Vasubandhu, Dignāga, and other important Cittamātra philosophers and logicians. Khenpo Ngaga is saying that he studied these intellectual traditions and misunderstood them.

9 Tentative. The Tibetan reads, “these appearances + because of these + thoughts’ + high + way + think about!” A clunkier literal translation might read, “Because of the appearances of this life, you should think about the gravity/importance/prominence of your thoughts.” Our slightly looser rendering follows the principles discussed in the appendix.

10 This line may be considered the poem’s colophon. Literally, it says, “Thus/there you have ‘Talking to Myself: Virtue!’” However, the line keeps the meter of all the other lines, and in the Tibetan text, it is not written in smaller font, as colophons often are. Therefore, we rendered it as the final poetic line, which doubles as a colophon.



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