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Historical Background of Kagyur and Tangyur

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Abstract

After Buddha's Mahāparinirvāṇa, the monks worked together to compile the teachings of the Buddha. They compiled three *Piṭakas* which are known as *Tripitaka*. The *Tripitaka* is available in several languages such as in Pali, Chinese, Tibetan and so forth. *Tripitaka* in Tibetan language is divided into two: Kagyur and Tangyur. Kagyur refers to *Buddhavacana*, i.e., the original teachings of the Buddha, while Tangyur refers to the commentarial works on the *Buddhavacana* by the authentic Indian Pandits such as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu and so on. The Kagyur and Tangyur are the great collections of almost all the Mahāyāna Buddhist religious works of India. The translation was started in the 7th century with a well-developed centralized organization under royal patronage and sponsorship of religious kings such as Srongtsan Gampo, Thrisrong Deutsan and Thri Ralpacan of Tibet. In 14th century, the great Zhalu scholar and editor Bu-ston played an important role in the establishment of the Kagyur and Tangyur in the present form. From the Narthang Monastery the first edition of Kagyur and Tangyur was compiled which is known as Narthang Edition. Some other editions of Kagyur and Tangyur are: Peking, Cone, Derge, Urga etc. In this article, I have tried to shed some light upon the Historical Background of reforming the translation work of the Buddha's teaching in the Kagyur and Tangyur.

Key Words: *Tripitaka, Kagyur, Tangyur, Bu-ston Rinchendrub, Narthang Edition.*

Introduction: After the Mahāparinirvāṇa (Wyl. mya ngan las 'das pa) of the Buddha, the Compassionate One, the community of monks chose five hundred Arhats (Wyl. dgra bcom pa) for compiling the teachings of the Buddha in Rajgriha. This came to be known as the first Buddhist Council or Rajgriha Dharma Sangiti. The doctrine recited by Ānanda (Wyl. kun dga' bo) during this Council was compiled which later came to be known as the Sūtra Piṭaka (Wyl. mdo sde'i snod). In the midst of this assembly the subject of discipline (Vinaya) was recited by Upāli, which is 'codified as the Vinaya Piṭaka (Wyl. 'dul ba'i sde snod). The other *Piṭaka* which was formulated in this assembly is known as Abhidharma Piṭaka (Wyl. mngon pa'i sde snod). These three *Piṭakas* are known as *Tripitaka* (Wyl. sde snod gsum). A disagreement arises between the Sthaviravāda and Mahā-saṃghika versions,

the Mahāsaṃghika account mentions the Abhidharma is the form of text which has been handed down after the rehearsal. The Mahīśāsaka version makes no mention of a third *Piṭaka*, but the Sarvāstivāda says that Ānanda recited both Sūtra as well as the Abhidharma in the same assembly. So it was also included in the *Tripitaka* as Abhidharma Piṭaka¹.

The *Tripitaka* is available in several languages such as in Pali, Chinese, Korean, Tibetan and so forth. The Sthaviravāda School claims *Tripitaka* originally belong to in Pali language. The Chinese forbear a huge collection of *Tripitaka* in Chinese translated from the Indian language (Sanskrit). We also have a similar *Tripitaka* in Tibetan language consisting about 333 volumes (108+225)². It was known as Kagyur (Wyl. bka' 'gyur) and Tangyur (Wyl. bstan 'gyur) literature.

Meaning of Kagyur and Tangyur: Obviously the term ‘Kagyur and Tangyur’ may not be known to all. It is because these two are Tibetan terms and are used in books and texts without changing or translating them into other languages. The reason may be that the translated words do not cover their entire sense as they suppose to be. Basically Kagyur refers to *Buddhavacana*, i.e., the original teachings of the Buddha, while Tangyur refers to the commentarial works on the *Buddhavacana* by some enriched Indian Pandits such as Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Āryadeva, Vasubandhu and so on. There is another collection of works called indigenous literature by Tibetan Buddhist scholars. Of those, a few are: ‘Terzhung’ (Treasure Texts) and ‘Sungbum’ (hundred thousand speeches). Out of these, the main focus of writing this article will be on the aforesaid title.

The Tibetan literary meaning of Kagyur: “bka” means- word; order; teaching; commands etc. and “’gyur” means- to translate; to change; to turn; to become etc., and the literary meaning of Tangyur: “bstan” means- to indicate; to show; to demonstrate. Here it is used to imply the doctrines of emeritus scholars and their commentarial works on the Buddha’s teaching etc. and “’gyur” means is same which said before.

Kagyur and Tangyur are commonly fashioned as the “Canon of Tibetan Buddhism” thus sometimes the expression “primary canon” is used for the Kagyur and “secondary canon” for the Tangyur. In general the term “canon” has several meanings; here it refers to a specific sense of a “normative text” or a “normative collection of texts” which should not be subject to alteration.

These are the non-canonical literatures. Together both canonical and non-canonical literatures constitute one of the largest and most important collections of ancient Buddhist literatures.

Origin of Kagyur & Tangyur: The collection of Kagyur and Tangyur was brought to Tibet from India and translated into Tibetan over a long period. The translation started in the 7th century with a well-developed centralized organization under royal patronage. Under the generous sponsorship of religious kings like ‘Srongtsan Gampo (Wyl. srong

¹ A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, p. 196.

² According to Peking Edition

btsan sgam po)', 'Thrisrong Deutsan (Wyl. khri srong lde btsan)' and 'Thri Ralpacan (Wyl. khri ral pa can)'³, the three Forefather Kings of Tibet. The Translation Project, which was started for the first time in one of the department of Samye Monastery⁴ known as 'Dragyur Gyagarling' (Wyl. sgra sgyur rgya gar gling) means 'Translation India Continent' was became the most significant and dynamic job ever seen in the entire history of Tibet and the world. As a result, thousands of Sanskrit, Pāli, and Chinese etc., works particularly on Buddhism were translated in Tibetan language.

Translation work reached a high point in the 8th and early 9th centuries. There was a break during political upheavals from the mid 9th century, and the "later period" started in the late 10th century. During the reign of king 'Thrisrong Deutsan', he invited 108 paṇḍitas from India, Nepal, China to disseminate Buddhism and translation of Buddha's words in Tibetan language. Many collection of Buddhist texts were brought in Tibet by scholar paṇḍitas, pilgrimage travellers, traders and Tibetan scholars.

During that time Tibetan lotsawas (translators) had translated those Buddha's teachings and works of Indian scholar Ācāryas, which were brought in Tibet. In the due course of time, grand translation work was smoothly carried out by the king Thrisrong Deutsan's kind sponsorship and in golden period of his reign. Later multiple copies of the manuscripts of the translated texts were made and kept in different monasteries, but they were not treated as a formalized collection for several centuries. The work of harmonizing and classifying them into genres began with simple descriptive inventories, and by the early 14th century major efforts were being made to collect copies and compile and edit definitive collections, perhaps inspired by the example of what Chinese scholars had done, as well as in response to the circulation of multiple versions and variations of many texts.

In the year 1312 C.E. one of the most famous and great scholar Jamgag Pakshi (Wyl. 'jam dgag pak Shi) was invited from Narthang monastery (Wyl. snar thang dgon pa) to Mongolia, where he stayed long and became the spiritual master of the royal family of the Yon dynasty (Wyl. yon rgyal rabs). There was another eminent scholar with him from Tibet who was called Chomdan Rigpe Raldri (Wyl. bcom ldan rig pa'i ral gri)⁵. They served and assisted the king to disseminate the Buddhism in Mongolia. In return, they were presented gold, silver, one boxful Chinese ink, papers, pens etc., by the king of Mongolia. After their return with all those gifts in Tibet, they started to search 'Kagyur' and 'Tangyur'

³ The three Dharma kings of early Yarlung period, who extended the rule from the 7th to 9th century with the most outstanding way over entire Tibet. They are: Srongtsan Gampo (ruled from 627-649 C.E.). Thrisrong Deutsan (ruled from 755-797 C.E.) and Thri Ralpacan (ruled from 815-836 C.E.).

⁴ The first monastery in Tibet, built on the role model of Odantapuri Vihāra in 763 C.E. by King Trisong Deutsan under the guidance of the Great Abbot Śāntarākṣita and Mahāsiddha Ācārya Padmasambhava which is situated on the bank of the Tsangpo River, south-east of Lhasa.

⁵ Chomden Rigpe Raldri (1227-1305 C.E.) was an important Kadampa master from Narthang Monastery. He played a key role in the first compilation of the Kagyur and Tangyur.

scriptures everywhere in Tibet and could ably find it accordingly. After long hard-work, they were successful to get the original translated copies of the scriptures from some places and monasteries in Tibet. On the basis of them they prepared a complete set of Kagyur and Tangyur for the first time in Tibet. It was a good collection of complete xylographs of both Kagyur and Tangyur with 100 and 225 vols⁶. It was the first hand written complete copy of Kagyur and Tangyur which were later edited by an eminent Tibetan scholar and translator in 14th century C.E. He gave the appropriate form of both the Kagyur and Tangyur. On the basis of that many other copies of Kagyur and Tangyur were published and became accessible to the large community of Tibetan people. These different editions, produced over the centuries in different parts of Tibet, though broadly similar in content, vary in the exact list of texts included, in the order in which the texts and genres are arranged, and in textual details within the texts. Another major area of difference was that the sets of tantras were included, which being an issue of strongly held sectarian preferences.

History of Kagyur: The monasteries of Narthang, Tshal Gungthang, and Zhalu are known to have been active centers of such work in the 14th and 15th centuries C.E. The great Zhalu scholar and editor Bu-ston (1290-1364 C.E.) is often credited with an important role in the establishment of the Kagyur in something like its present form. The introduction of xylograph printing from China in the early 15th century made it easier to standardize the collections, but different editions of Kagyur continued nevertheless to appear in different regions of Tibet, and new translations as well as newly discovered texts considered “canonical” were still being added in the 19th century. Alexander Csoma de Koros’s⁷ analytical contributions concerning the texts within the block-print edition of the Narthang Monastery in the one hand and the study of an individual text by Philippe Edouard Foucaux⁸ on the other hand. In general researchers used a single source or later on a few manuscript and xylograph editions only. The first steps were taken to compare the arrangement of sections and individual texts within the different editions of the Kagyur.

The collection of manuscript, containing multiple copies of some texts, now known as the “Old Narthang”, no longer exists. However, copies made from this common source were taken to different parts of Tibet and evolved into two slightly different branches or traditions: the “eastern” branch being known as the Tshalpa (Wyl. *tshal pa*) and the “western” later giving rise to the manuscript version known as the Thempangma (Wyl. *them spangs ma*).

⁶ According to Narthang Edition

⁷ Alexander Csoma de Koros (1784-1842 C.E.) was a Hungarian philologist, author of the first Tibetan-English dictionary and grammar book. He was given the title ‘Boddhisatva’ by the Japanese in 1933.

⁸ Philippe Édouard Foucaux (1811-1894 C.E.) was a French Tibetologist. He published the first Tibetan grammar in French and occupied the first chair of Tibetan studies in Europe.

The catalogues of the Tantras by Drakpa Gyaltsen (Wyl. grags pa rgyal mtshan)⁹ and by Chogyal Phakpa Logro Gyaltsan (Wyl. chos rgyal 'phags pa blo gros rgyal mtsan)¹⁰ were used in arranging the texts within the Tantra section of an Old Narthang manuscript. They also influenced Bu-ston Rinchendrub (Wyl. bu ston rin chen grub; 1290-1364 C.E.) whose *Gyubumgyi Karchag* (Wyl. rgyud 'bum gyi dkar chag)¹¹ became the model for the Tantra section of the Thempangma (Wyl. them spangs ma) Kagyurs and later on the Derge edition for which Bu-ston played an important role in asserting the Tshalpa (Wyl. tshal pa) Kagyur. However it cannot yet be estimated in full.

The Tshalpa version of the Kagyur was the product of substantial revision and reorganization of the texts, as well as the addition of three volumes of tantras from the early translation period. The basis root for the first woodblock printing, the Yunglo edition, made in China under the Ming dynasty emperor Yunglo in 1410 C.E.

The notion that the 14th century Narthang collection formed a thoroughly structured consistent corpus cannot be sustained. It was incomplete, it was not in order (at least not to Bu-ston's standardization), and it contained copies. On the basis of Mahāsūtras, the old Narthang manuscript, Kagyur was the conceptual example for later, large-scale but not their textual model. All Kagyurs whether belonging to the Bu-ston's standardization tradition or not. Some of which are known by their names contained in the section colophons to the Lithang Kagyur. In this context the value of the Tabo fragments and the Newark Kagyur cannot be overestimated. In any case, editing a Kagyur text requires investigations in the transmission of that specific text using all accessible sources.

The modern descriptions of the different Kagyurs could produce the impression that the block-print or manuscript editions apply different principles for arranging the individual texts. By way of contrast the manuscripts belonging to the Thempangma branch show an astonishingly consistent pattern, as has been shown for the Tantra (Wyl. rgyud) section in a study on Bu-ston's Catalogue of the Tantras. As a matter of fact, this observation is valid for other sections as well. Like the Lemma Ganti Dūkyido (Wyl. lem ma gan ti'i dus kyi mdo) of the Selkar (Wyl. sel dkar) [London] Manuscript relying on the catalogue of the Stok Palace manuscript should be split up into four entries.

The first block-print edition of the Kagyur dating back to 1410 C.E. belongs' to the Tshalpa branch which was prepared in Beijing (Peking). The Derge edition however occupies a peculiar position, because Situ Tsuglag Chokyi Nangwa (Wyl. si tu gtsug lag

⁹ Drakpa Gyaltsen (1147-1216 C.E.) was the uncle of Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (Wyl. kun dga' rgyal mtshan).

¹⁰ Chogyal Phakpa Logrö Gyaltsen (1235-1280 C.E.) was a great master of the Sakya lineage. He was the nephew of Sakya Paṇḍita Kunga Gyaltsen (Wyl. kun dga' rgyal mtshan).

¹¹ It was the catalogue of Gyü-Bum (Wyl. rgyud 'bum; Eng. Hundred Thousand Tantras) of the Nyingma School.

chos kyi snang ba)¹², the editor adopted the Tantra section, the Thempangma pattern, sporadically inserting additional texts. As concerns the arrangement of individual texts, the Narthang block-print of the Kagyur too introduced a reformed pattern which the Lhasa xylograph in turn follows to some extent.

The Thempangma manuscript is considered more reliable than the Tshalpa and other versions in many respects, but many of its better features were incorporated into the later printed versions. It is generally accepted that, overall, the most reliable version of the Kagyur is the Derge collection, printed in the 18th century at the Derge Printery, under the patronage of the Tenpa Tsering, the ruler of the Derge Principality, and the editorship of Situ Pañchen Chökyi Jungne (Wyl. si tu paN chen chos kyi 'byung gnas)¹³. A large number of new translations were added by Situ Panchen's successor, Shuchen Tsultrim Rinchen. Shuchen's Derge Kagyur, known as the post-Parphu, is the Derge Kagyur that is printed today.

History of Tangyur: This word Tangyur originated in Tibet in 7th century C.E. when Tibetan language was framed by the first translator of Tibet, Thunmi Sambhota. Consequently, those Buddhist *sāstras* were translated from Sanskrit language to Tibetan language and later this collected set was designated as 'Tangyur'. The credit of its systematization goes to the Tibetan scholar Bu-ston Rinchen Drub in 15th century C.E.

In Tangyur, the Cone and Derge Tangyurs go together each against from Narthang and Beijing block-print version. This relation between the text witnesses has been corroborated except for the first Tangyur volume [Stotra/Eulogy section (Wyl. *bstod tshogs*)]. Recently the Golden Manuscript from Gaden Monastery which was prepared in the 18th century C.E. as well became known as a fifth text of for the Tangyur.

The origin of the Tangyur, i.e. its growth out of small collections of texts, has not yet been investigated in detail. In any case Bu-ston (Wyl. bu ston rin chen grub) influenced the formation of the present day Tangyur editions considerably by his work "bstan 'gyur gyi dkar chag yid bzhin nor bu dbang gi rgyal po'i phreng ba" a comprehensive catalogue written in 1335 C.E.

Later other sets of Tangyur copies were mostly compared and based on the original and complete set of Narthang Tangyur. This tradition was followed up by the other sponsors and publishers in Tibet vary widely. After the death of 5th Dalai Lama Losang Gyatso (Wyl. blo bzang rgya mtsho) in 15th century C.E., the most famous Regent of Tibet Desi Sangay Gyatsho (Wyl. sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho) assembled all the scholars and expert

¹² Situ Pañchen Chökyi Jungné after getting novice ordination, became known as Situ Tsuglag Chökyi Nangwa

¹³ Situ Pañchen Chökyi Jungné (1700-1774 C.E.) was born in Derge. He was one of the most influential masters in Tibetan history. He was recognized as the Situ incarnation by the Eighth Shamarpa. From 1731-33, he worked on editing and correcting the woodblocks to be used for printing the Derge edition of the Kagyur.

calligraphers of Tibet at one place in Ü-Tsang. By his order they written down a complete set of Tangyur volumes in golden ink and was kept in the residential temple of Potala Palace, Lhasa.

In 1737 C.E., the king of Derge known as ‘Tenpa Tsering’ (Wyl. sde dge rgyal po bstan pa tshe ring) became sponsor and ordered to xylograph the complete set of Tangyur volumes and was kept in the Publishing House of Derge. It was known as Wooden Blocked printed or Xylographed Derge Tangyur. In 1741 C.E., another xylograph of complete Tangyur volume was prepared under the sponsorship of ‘Sonam Tobgye’ from ‘Pho Lhawa’ (Wyl. bsod nams stobs rgyas pho lha ba). It was placed in Narthang monastery and was known as xylographed Narthang Tangyur. Almost in the same year, in Peking many scholars from China, Mongolia and Tibet gathered in huge number. They started to translate whole Tangyur in Mañju language (Wyl. man ju skad), the language of sparsely populated peoples inhabited in the North-East region of China.

In the middle of 18th century C.E., chieftain from ‘Cone’ (Wyl. co ne) had xylographed a complete set of Tangyur volume and it was kept in the monastery of ‘Cone Gonpa’ (Wyl. co ne dgon pa), which is known as Cone Tangyur. Its catalogue was prepared by Jigme Wangpo, the 2nd reincarnation of ‘Jamyang Shadpa’ (Wyl. ’jam dbyangs bzhad pa sku phreng gnyis pa ’jigs med dbang po).

Tangyur is a miscellaneous collection of literary works, both sacred and general, consisting of 225 volumes. But now it varies as per the edition from the different publishers. So, sometimes it is counted 218 and 220 volumes also. Very few texts from Tangyur belong to Tibetan authorship; which are mostly the translation into Tibetan from Chinese and Sanskrit texts. Broadly, Tangyur is divided into two great divisions as; Sūtra (Wyl. mdo) and Tantra (Wyl. rgyud). The Sūtra division has 136 volumes and Tantra division has 89 volumes.

At the very beginning almost all the texts in the Kagyur and the Tangyur, the title is specified in its original language and in Tibetan translation. Moreover, generally each text in the Kagyur starts with the word “Thus have I heard (Wyl. ’di skad bdag gis thos pa), it shows that a direct witness renders a sermon or other teaching delivered by the Buddha himself, by a Bodhisattva or by another noble being. Thus Kagyur texts claim a higher degree of authenticity which suits the fact that Tangyur in general covers works of individual human authors.

The contents of the Kagyur & Tangyur: The contents of the Kagyur literature divided in to seven sub-divisions. Those are: (1) Vinaya, (2) Prajñāpāramitā, (3) Avataṃsaka, (4) Ratnakūṭa, (5) Sūtra, (6) Tantra and (7) Pracin Tantras. And the contents of the Tangyur literature divided in to eleven sub-divisions. Those are: (1) Stotras, (2) Tantra-ṭika, (3) Prajñāpāramitā, (4) Mādhyamika, (5) Sūtra-tika, (6) Citamatra-Yogācāra, (7) Abhidharma, (8) Vinaya, (9) Jātakamālā, (10) Lekha, and (11) Sādhāraṇa Śāstra¹⁴.

¹⁴ Tulku Thondup Rinpoche. *Buddhist Civilization in Tibet*, pp.51, 52.
Volume-III, Issue-IV

Present Collection of Kagyur & Tangyur: As printing technology developed, a number of different woodblock editions were printed, some in China and some in Tibet, all based on the Tshalpa tradition: the Wanli, Lithang and Kangxi editions in the 17th century C.E., and the Cone and Quianlong in the 18th century C.E.

Other regional woodblock editions made from the 18th century onwards, although still based on the Tshalpa tradition, included varying amounts of cross-input from the Thempangma lineage. These are the Narthang, Derge, Urga and Lhasa editions.

Many monastery and university libraries have printed copies of the Kagyur and Tangyur; the Derge versions are probably the most widespread. In addition to the Derge collections, copies of the Peking, Lithang, Cone, Narthang, Urga, and Lhasa Kagyurs, and Cone, Narthang, and Peking Tangyurs are all available in some libraries.

For most people, it is easiest to consult the collections online, and the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Centre site currently provides outlines and full-text views of the Derge, Stok Palace, Lhasa, Urga, and Narthang Kagyurs, and the Derge, Golden, Narthang and Cone Tangyurs.

A version of the Kagyur and Tangyur, the Nyingma Edition, was published in the US and distributed to institutions world-wide in 1977-1983 C.E. It is based mainly on the Derge versions and accompanied by a useful 8-volume research catalogue and bibliography.

A remarkable recent edition of the whole of the Kagyur and Tangyur, published by the Ka-ten Pe-dur Khang in China (and sometimes referred to as the “New Beijing Kagyur and Tangyur”), is based on the Derge versions but the notes and lists of all the texts variants in seven other different versions of the Kagyur (the Yunglo, Lithang, Kangxi, Cone, Narthang, Ulan Bator, and Lhasa editions) and three other versions of the Tangyur (the Beijing, Narthang, and Cone editions).

Conclusion: The Kagyur and the Tangyur are the great collections of almost all the Mahāyāna Buddhist religious works of India and very little of Tibetan indigenous works. The Kagyur and Tangyur are the encyclopedia of Tibetan Literature and Buddhism. At present, the enormous collection of Tibetan Literature and secular works are preserved in the Library of Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Leh; Central University of Tibetan Studies, Sarnath; Tokyo Bunko, Oriental Library Japan, Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Department of Indo-Tibetan Studies, and Lipika Manuscriptology, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan; Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, H.P.; Bihar Research Society, Patna and so on.

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