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Obituary | Tsering Dhundup Gonkatsang (1951–2018)



(Balance Photography, 2014)

John Bray

In the course of his life Tsering Dhundup Gonkatsang played many roles, but he found his vocation as—above all else—a teacher and a translator. Confident in his own skills, he never sought any particular academic prestige. Rather he found fulfillment in using his expertise to help others. This involved him in a wide variety of tasks, from deciphering complex historical texts to organising community events, making films, and translating human rights documents into Tibetan. His formal career culminated in his appointment as the first Instructor in Tibetan at the University of Oxford. Beyond his family, his greatest delight was in the success of his students.

Tsering was born in Da-nga, Sharkhog, eastern Tibet in 1951, shortly after the Chinese Communist takeover of the region. His family were relatively prosperous, the kind of people who might be classified as class enemies. In

the mid-1950s, fearing that their son might be at risk, his parents took him on what became an extended journey first to Ngawa, then to Dartsedo (Kanding), and eventually to Lhasa. At that point, his father got into trouble with the Chinese authorities, and was imprisoned. Together with his mother, uncle and aunt, Tsering travelled on to Kalimpong in north-east India where he went to his first school. They did not see or hear from his father for more than 20 years.

In India, Tsering and his relatives at first lived precariously, and in that respect their fortunes mirror those of many others in the Tibetan refugee community. From Kalimpong they moved to Simla. During the colder winter months, the adults earned a supplementary income selling sweaters in Calcutta (now Kolkata), and Tsering helped out during the school holidays. Later, his uncle and aunt

were allocated a small plot of land in Bylakuppe, a Tibetan settlement in southern India, where they lived from the sale of maize and other crops, as well as wood gathered from the nearby forest.

Despite these hardships, Tsering was fortunate in being able to gain a good education as a boarder at the Central School for Tibetans at Happy Valley in Mussoorie, where he excelled both academically and at sport. Everything that he achieved subsequently was grounded on this early training.

Tsering went on from Mussoorie to study English at Chandigarh University. After graduation, he was recruited into the Special Frontier Force, a Tibetan military unit within the Indian Army, based in Chakrata (now part of Uttarakhand). He completed his training, but there was a delay in the confirmation of his appointment as an officer following an Indian government policy review after the 1977 national elections. Rather than hang around waiting, Tsering decided to change course and become a teacher. He therefore studied for a B.Ed degree at the Central Institute of Education in Delhi. In 1979, he joined the SOS Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) school in Dharamsala, the north Indian town that serves as the headquarters of the Tibetan government-in-exile, and in due course rose to become headmaster.

Early in the 1980s, during the period when there was a brief hope of political liberalization in Tibet, Tsering's father was able to travel via Nepal to India. Despite not knowing either Hindi or English, he found his way to Calcutta and, having met a Tibetan monk at Howrah station, contacted the Tibetan community in search of his family. Tsering once told a moving story of how his father was reunited with his aunt. Thinking that a sudden unannounced meeting might be too much of a shock, his father waited outside her home while her relatives prepared her with a gradual build-up of hope and expectation. Their conversation started with the thought that it would be good to hear from Tsering's father after so many years. Then they discussed how wonderful it would be if he could come to India. And it would be even better if he could come to see her. The climax came when they announced that he was waiting just outside.

Tsering's father had hoped that his family might accompany him back to Tibet. His uncle went so far as to obtain the necessary identity papers from the Chinese embassy in Delhi, but they ultimately decided that they would return only when the Dalai Lama himself was able to do so. Meanwhile, Tsering continued his teaching career in Dharamsala.

It was in Dharamsala that Tsering first became interested in the challenges of translation. The immediate spur was a guidance document issued in Tibetan by Samdhong Rinpoche, who was then at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Varanasi. Until then, exile Tibetan schools had focused on the teaching of English as a core survival skill, often at the expense of the mother tongue. Samdhong Rinpoche now called on them to redress the balance in favour of Tibetan. Evidently, his concerns were justified because Tsering had to translate this guidance for his Tibetan colleagues who were, themselves, products of an English-language education. He sent his translation to Samdhong Rinpoche, whose warm endorsement encouraged him to take his own Tibetan language skills a step further.

In 1987 Tsering moved to the University of Glasgow in Scotland to study for a postgraduate degree in education, with a particular focus on mother-tongue teaching. He then moved to north London and set up a home there with his wife Dolker and their three children, Lhayum, Choeyang, and Tashi, who all joined him from Dharamsala. Dolker's constant support and their happy family life served as the foundation for everything else that Tsering did. He was immensely proud of his children, their partners, and two grandchildren, all of whom survive him.

From 1991 until 2001, Tsering worked at the International Community School in London, eventually becoming Head Teacher. Meanwhile, he was involved in a wide range of other activities. Already an accomplished teacher of English to non-native speakers, he now began to apply the same skills to the teaching of his own language. I was myself among a select group of friends who regularly visited his house in north London for private lessons. He also served as the General Secretary of the Tibetan Community in Britain (TCB) from 1994 to 1996, and for many years taught Tibetan to the TCB children. At the same time, he provided translation to and from Tibetan for a number of organisations, including Amnesty International, the Tibet Information Network (TIN), and the Trace Foundation in New York.

Once he had settled in London, Tsering was able to revisit Tibet. In 1997, he travelled to his home in Amdo, together with Dolker and Choeyang. In 2004, he and Dolker visited her home in Tinkye, southern Tibet. Finally, he was again able to visit to Amdo in 2007, a year before his father passed away.

In 2001, Tsering took up a position as Instructor in Tibetan at the University of Oxford; this was a new post, created

in memory of the Tibetan scholar Michael Aris (1946–1999). Tsering’s now well-honed talents as a teacher and a linguist meant that he was the perfect candidate. During his years in Oxford he was able to put all his varied skills and experience to the best possible use.

Tsering taught beginner and intermediate Tibetan, as well as working intensively with advanced students on the reading of specific texts. He typically spent two days a week in Oxford. Driving up from his home in London, he would start early in the morning and stay late, surviving on orange juice when there was no time for meals. For his teaching materials Tsering drew on an eclectic range of sources including the adventures of Tintin, his own translation of the Twelve Days of Christmas (an English carol), as well as Tibetan-language Internet blogs and historical texts. He presented papers on Tibetan teaching materials at successive triennial conferences of the International Association of Tibetan Studies (IATS). The panel that he planned on this topic at the 15th IATS conference in Paris in 2019 will be dedicated to his memory.

Tsering’s students remember him for his warmth, encouragement and sense of humour, often telling jokes that set the class into fits of laughter. At the same time, they marvel at his linguistic versatility, whether they needed help with dharma texts, poetry, folk tales or historical records. Always unassuming, he was at the heart of the Oxford Tibetan studies community.

Tsering was equally generous in his collaboration with researchers beyond Oxford, and I was myself a beneficiary. Together we wrote three historical papers on Ladakh, and a fourth was in preparation at the time of his death. Other close colleagues included Michael Willis of the British Museum with whom he wrote three joint essays; they were working on a project on the advent of Buddhism into Tibet according to the *Chronicles of dBa’ gsal snang* at the time of his death.

Tsering’s other personal projects included the translation of an illustrated biography of the 14th Dalai Lama on behalf of the Domey (Amdo) Association in Dharamsala, and a book on the protector deity of Kirti monastery (in Ngawa, Eastern Tibet). At the same time, he was still fully involved in Tibetan community activities, serving as a trustee of the Tibet Foundation from 2009 to 2017, as well as Tibet Watch, a UK-based NGO monitoring Tibetan affairs, from 2008–2016. He provided translations for, among others, the US-based Radio Free Asia, and collaborated on the production of films and documentaries related to Tibet. In all of these activities, he rarely showed signs of fatigue. Tsering’s daughter Choeyang shares part of the secret. For her

father, there was no boundary between his formal work and the wide range of Tibet-related activities that brought him satisfaction and joy.

In April of this year I met Tsering at the British Library in London, and we chatted for two hours in the canteen. This would in any case have been a memorable occasion, since I now live in Singapore and we rarely had an opportunity to meet in person. Now the meeting has taken on an extra significance. Our conversation turned to his birthplace in eastern Tibet. Tsering then ran through the key events of his life, retelling old stories, and sharing new ones, including some of the anecdotes related here. He had one more year go to before retirement from Oxford, and then he would have had plenty of other projects. The overwhelming impression was a sense of fulfilment and contentment.

Less than three weeks later, Tsering died after a car crash on his way to Oxford, having started early on a Friday morning to offer extra help to students before the start of his formal lessons. It was and remains hard to take in this news. He still had so much to contribute and—on a personal note—there was still so much that I and others had wanted to ask him.

Tsering’s legacy includes a range of articles and translations in print and scattered across the Internet. More than that, he will remain a continuing presence in the lives of the many people who knew him as a friend, colleague, and mentor. Between us, we will build on what we learnt from him, take it a step further, and share it with others. There can be no better way of honouring the best of friends and the most beloved of teachers.

John Bray is an independent scholar currently based in Singapore. His main research interests concern the history of Christian missions to Tibet as well as 19th and early 20th century trade and politics in the Himalayan border regions. His publications include two edited volumes, *Ladakhi Histories* (2005) and *Art and Architecture in Ladakh* (2014, with Erberto Lo Bue). He was President of the International Association for Ladakh Studies from 2007 to 2015 and is a member of the editorial board of *HIMALAYA*.