

Enlightened beings everywhere
All enter this source.
This source is beyond time and space.
One moment is ten thousand years.

Even if you cannot see it,
The whole universe is before your eyes.

Infinitely small is infinitely large:
No boundaries, no differences.
Infinitely large is infinitely small:
Measurements do not matter here.

What is is the same as what is not.
What is not is the same as what is.
Where it is not like this,
Don't bother staying.

One is all,
All is one.
When you see things like this,
You do not worry about being incomplete.

Trust and Mind are not two.
Not-two is trusting the Mind.

Words and speech don't cut it,
Can't now, never could, won't ever.

Seng Ts'an was the third Chinese patriarch of Zen, having received transmission from Bodhidharma's successor, Hui K'o. The poem attributed to him, the "Hsin Hsin Ming" (lit., "Trust Mind Inscription"), is one of the earliest and most influential Zen writings, blending together Buddhist and Taoist teachings.

The translator, Stanley Lombardo, teaches Zen at the Kansas Zen Center and Classics at the University of Kansas.

The Mind Behind the Words

Stanley Lombardo's translations of Hesiod's *Works and Days* and the *Tao Te Ching* have been praised by critics for their poetic immediacy and deep loyalty to the spirit of the original. His recent translation of Homer's *Iliad* (Hackett Books) has been hailed by *The New York Times* as "daring," a "vivid and sometimes disarmingly hardbitten reworking." His translation of the Third Patriarch's "Trusting in Mind" is being published by Primary Point Press, in conjunction with DharmaCrafts, Inc. The *Primary Point* interview, conducted by Ven. Hyon Gak Sunim, follows.

What is translation?

Every time you say anything you are translating, translating some original experience into words. "Trans-late" means "carry across." When we speak we use words to carry across something that we perceive or intend to someone else. This carrying across is always imperfect. We can never completely express our experience with words. That's why we say, "Open your mouth, already a mistake." Literary translation is like that too, and even worse if you only translate the words, because then you have two layers of words between the original experience and the reader.

Then what does a translator do?

You have to translate the experience behind the words of the text, the guts of the text. So my job as a translator is to perceive the original meaning behind the words and translate that, carry that over. It's just like in a *kong-an* interview: don't be caught by the teacher's words, perceive instead the teacher's mind. Then how do you bring that mind forth and make it really clear? When I was working on the

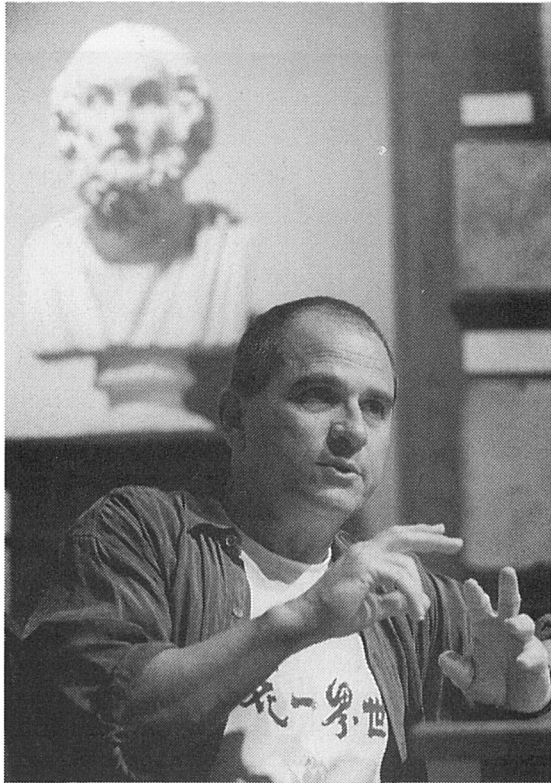


Photo of Stanley Lombardo, JDPSN, by Earl Richardson

Iliad I kept thinking of the phrase “locking eyebrows with the masters of old.” Every time I started to translate I would go out on Troy’s dusty plain with Homer and try to lock eyebrows with him, to see with his mind. When I could do that, the words were no problem; it was like I was behind the Greek and translating Homer’s mind rather than his words. Then I was free to use live words. When words are really alive they become poetry. Then there’s a chance that the poetry of the translation will measure up to the original poetry.

On an academic level, that makes sense. But you are a teacher of the dharma. Can you be a professor and especially a translator and still not be attached to words and speech?

If you can go beyond words and speech, then you can use words and speech correctly, to point to the just-now, just-this quality of experience, the immediacy and directness of it. Great poetry can do that—Homer’s poetry is very much like that—and that’s the sort of poetry I like to teach and translate.

Would you give an example of the just-now, just-this quality of Homer?

Sure. Here’s Homer describing the Myrmidons, Achilles’ crack troops in the *Iliad*:

*Think of wolves
Ravenous for meat. It is impossible
to describe their savage strength in the hunt,
But after they have killed an antlered stag
Up in the hills and torn it apart, they come down
With gore on the jaws, and in a pack
Go to lap the black surface water in a pool
Fed by a dark spring, and as they drink,
Crimson curls float off their slender tongues.
But their hearts are still, and their bellies gorged.*

Just that moment when the wolves are drinking, and the whole world is brought to that one, completely still point. Speech and words can do just that—bring everything to one point and clarify the great matter. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt once said that speech is our insertion point, our point of entry into this world. Keeping that point sharp and clear and alive is very important.

Is translating a dharma text different from secular literature?

Not really, not for me. But I’m pretty selective in what I translate. If a text is not alive—and some dharma texts aren’t—why translate it? It’s like giving acupuncture to a dead cow—no matter how good you are with the needles, the cow will never say “Moo.” Still, I really admire the great dharma translators, like Marpa the Translator, who translated the sutras into Tibetan, or Kumarajiva, who was responsible for translating so much of the Pali canon into Chinese in the fourth century. Kumarajiva went beyond literal translation, finding Chinese words that really brought Buddhism over to Chinese culture. In fact you could say that he *created* Chinese Buddhist culture by creating its vocabulary. This kind of translation carries a lot of responsibility with it and tends to be conservative; but even when you have to be conservative lexically and syntactically you still have a responsibility to the life-force of the text you are translating.

What about Zen poems? Are the esthetic criteria for translating Zen poems different than for “regular” poems?

With Zen poems—and with a work like the *Tao Te Ching* as well—it’s even more important to translate the mind behind the words, and this does create a different esthetic. I don’t mean just minimalism: it gives the poem a different kind of power because the speech is so closely connected to direct perception, that function of mind, rather than thinking. There’s nothing extra in a good Zen poem, so the translator has to be careful not to add anything. You have to work right down to the bones and make them chime and not worry too much about fleshing things out. Working with Zen poetry has influenced my translation of other poetry and has helped, I think, to keep my work lean, rapid and to the point.