

Translating the Compass of Zen: A Healing Journey

Wieneke Olthof

Nine years ago I met a girl from Korea. Seven years ago the girl from Korea told me I might appreciate the Kwan Um School of Zen. Six years ago I spent ten weeks meditating in Wubongsa Temple, Poland.

I then learned: just do it.

Four years ago I was terribly sick. I was so sick that I could not meditate, even just sitting still on a pillow. I created my own version of meditation: I started rereading the *Compass of Zen* and translating it into Dutch. It was a healing journey. It gave me something to commit to. It was marvelous, to be so sick and yet to be creating nonetheless.

THE PROCESS OF TRANSLATION

With the first page I translated, I was extremely critical. It was horrible what I'd done. That is how I felt. Every word felt awkward, the sentences incorrect. Then I decided that was not going to work. I could not make something perfect at once, if even at all. I would just continue translating, and not look back. Whenever I felt I didn't know (yet) how to translate a word well—capturing its spirit and intent, rather than a literal translation—I would just leave it in English, mark it in red, and continue. Just do it.

COLLECTIVE WISDOM

A new journey started once Veronique (*Primary Point's* managing editor for Europe) joined me in the project, reading the texts after I'd checked them once more myself. I'd send her a chapter, and she'd send me her input so I could finalize the chapter. Difficult words we would discuss over mail, sometimes with Koen Vermeulen JDPSN. It was great and joyful work, trying to discern the meaning of a combination of words like "mind point." The word *mind* already does not really have an adequate translation in Dutch (in my humble opinion). Even more difficult is the combination of the words *mind* and *point*. And there are so many of these sayings, words, and concepts in the book. We tried to approach their spirit as best we could, with care, consideration, and curiosity.

TRANSLATION AS PRACTICE

Translating is a systematic practice. Write "Zen Mas-



ter" on page 1, and you need to make sure on all other pages you do not write "zen master" or "zenmaster." One needs to keep track of the brilliant translations found in one page, to repeat and reuse them whenever they pop up again further along in the book, so that the reader can recognize them. Sometimes I choose to deliberately vary the translation of certain words in order to keep the text dynamic, or to keep the rhythm of the sentence. It's poetry.

I loved the commitment of this translation practice: just continue, continue, continue. I loved the discovery and the discussion: is this word better, or that one? Finally, Leen, a sangha member in Brussels, looked over the whole translation. Ultimately, the publisher said the end result was so good, hardly any-

thing would have to be revised.

HEALING

I had once started to translate because I could not meditate. This alternative form of Zen practice helped me through a difficult year of physical disability and gave me something worthwhile to do when I couldn't do much else. It kept me busy and out of a place of despair, it gave me purpose and trained my "just do it" muscles. Who knew I could translate a book and get it published? And even more so, who knew I could do it while severely ill? Even now, almost five years later, it feels like one of the biggest achievements in my life. Translating the *Compass of Zen* gave me the wisdom that "you can always do something." In December 2022, there will be a Dutch translation in the stores.

Just do it. ♦

Wieneke Olthof found the Kwan Um School of Zen in 2015. She practiced with strong commitment for two years, including two months at Wubongsa Temple in Poland. She lives with her cat in Zevenaar in the Netherlands, works in local government, and translates articles, workbooks, and books as a passion.