

Tibet Kolloquium

Dr. Joanna Bialek

The Tibetan fiery way to *nirvāṇa*: Reflections on the Old Tibetan *mya ngan*

As can be gathered from Old Tibetan texts like PT 236 or PT 1042 Buddhist circles were particularly interested in gaining control over rites and beliefs related to death that were adhered to by non-Buddhists on the Tibetan Plateau. These texts attest to great efforts undertaken by Buddhists to replace old concepts with their own while preserving the ancient terms or changing them slightly (folk etymologisation) so that they also better ‘embodied’ the new ideas on the surface. One of the most crucial Buddhist terms related to afterlife is rendered in Tibetan as *mya ngan las ’das pa*, lit. “what has passed over *mya ngan*”. It translates the Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa*. It is perplexing and indeed rather uncommon that a nominalised verbal phrase of five syllables was chosen to render a simple Sanskrit lexeme *nirvāṇa*. The pertinent questions are: why did Tibetans choose *mya ngan las ’das pa* to translate Skt. *nirvāṇa*? Why did they choose *mya ngan* to render formations as etymologically different as *śoka* and *nirvāṇa* in Sanskrit? Using the oldest extant sources on written Tibetan I will attempt to puzzle out the history of the compound *mya ngan* and to demonstrate the influence a multilingual environment of Central Asiatic oases could have wielded on the formation of Tibetan language.

Trained in Religious Studies and Philosophy Johanna Bialek holds a Ph.D. in Tibetology from the Philipps-Universität Marburg (“Studies in the lexis and word-formation of Old Tibetan. Compounds and compounding”). Currently she is employed at the Humboldt-University zu Berlin as a research associate (DFG-Project: “Old Tibetan Annals. A Comprehensive Text Grammar”)

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