

# Steal this Sutra. . . . oops, its already long, long gone. . . last seen mutating uncontrollably in the wilds of the web. . . <sup>1</sup>

Jamie Hubbard, Smith College

Current: Wednesday, October 22, 2008

"The net is like a huge vandalized library. Someone has destroyed the catalog and removed the front matter, indexes, etc. from hundreds of thousands of books and torn and scattered what remains..."Surfing" is the process of sifting through this disorganized mess in the hope of coming across some useful fragments of text and images that can be related to other fragments. The net is even worse than a vandalized library because thousands of additional unorganized fragments are added daily by the myriad of cranks, sages, and persons with time on their hands who launch their unfiltered messages into cyberspace."

Michael Gorman, "The Corruption of Cataloging"  
*Library Journal* 120 (15 September, 1995): 34.

**Abstract:** While celebrating the creation of the Yehan Numata Chairs in Buddhist Studies, I comment on the fact that both in the past and in the present texts have frequently been "stolen," that is, taken from their owners and re-fashioned by "textual communities." Will the real *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sutra* please stand up? This paper also depends heavily on what we more commonly think of as theft: I have freely stolen from many different sources; no ideas are new (under the sun or in this paper), and I have plagiarized myself liberally. . . others I have cited (unless I haven't). There is also the mass of dictionaries and other reference works as well as academic writings, ranging from the community created Xerox copies of grad school days to the pdf flotsam and jetsam floating around the web and co-habiting with each other on my hard drive. The truth is that I am a thief and always have been.

## 1) Introduction: Celebration

On this occasion celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Numata Chairs in Buddhist Studies throughout the world we have been asked to reflect on the contribution that the BDK has made to the study, translation, and transmission of texts, and particularly the achievements

---

<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of this was originally presented to the "Text, Translation, and Transmission" symposium at UC-Berkeley on October 20, 2007; my thanks to the BDK for making the symposium possible.

that have taken place over the twenty years since the chairs were first established. A Numata position in Buddhist Studies was first established at Smith College in 1987, exactly twenty years ago, and as the long-time holder of the position (as well as other grants that I have received from the BDK), I am very, very pleased to be able to participate in honoring Yehan Numata, the founder of the BDK, his family, and the entire BDK operation for their enormous contributions to Buddhist studies over the past twenty years.

In the ancient Japanese literary tradition of *Norito* and *Manyō* poetry, there was a practice of uttering *yogoto* 寿詞 (*kotobuki no kotoba* 寿の詞) and *Kagen* 雅言 (*miyabi no kotoba* 雅の言), words of honor, celebration, and congratulations that were “performed” on auspicious or felicitous occasions; it seems to me that this is just such an auspicious occasion in which to engage in this ancient practice—and I will.

So, what I would like to do is to offer some quick words on the topic of sutra theft in the past. Then I will give a brief demonstration of some of the ways in which I think that Buddhist sutras have been stolen in our own times. Finally I will offer my thoughts on how our study, translation, and transmission of Buddhist texts has both changed a great deal in theory while not really changing very much in practice (thank goodness) while yet again being almost entirely transformed by the new technologies that we all use these days.

In short, I see two major shifts in our field over the past twenty years in the way that we deal with texts. The first is that in Buddhist studies, as in other disciplines, the text itself has been almost entirely dethroned as the central concern of our work, especially as a source of information about what Buddhists actually did. The second is that, due to advances in computer technology that I believe rank right up there in importance with the advent of writing, printing, and moveable type, we now have greater access to vastly more texts than ever before possible, meaning that in fact the study, translation, and transmission of the “dethroned” text is taking place at a level never before imagined. And here, I am very pleased to say, the recent BDK decision to not only make the BDK English translations freely available on the net, but to embrace forward-looking technologies—technologies, I might, that were already envisioned by Mr. Numata himself and that ensure the most widespread dissemination and comprehensive sort of study—is indeed an event worth honoring and celebrating.

## 2) Textual Communities

“Textual communities” is a term that refers to the fact that texts are neither produced nor consumed in private or isolation—texts are a “social practice,” and they have always been formed, translated, and read in communities—communities that includes both the texts and the people that deal with them, communities that stretch across time and cultures in ever-shifting constellations of interests (ideologies, if you will), functions, and roles. Whether transmitted orally in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC India or the Tibetan maṇi stone that decorates the front of my college library—a text has never been just a bare text, existing in some sort of a vacuum, privately encountered by a single reader, with a pre-determined meaning that we can discover if we dig far enough. Texts have always been produced, translated, transmitted, and enjoyed in community. This is what folks in literary studies refer to as “textual communities.” And, contrary to the poor cataloger cited at the beginning of this paper, this chaotic condition has always been the case. Whether investigating the authors’ or readers’ communities at a particular time, across time, or critiquing our *own* stake as Orientalist scholars in the production, translation and transmission of texts (a somewhat narcissistic endeavor, to my mind, albeit rather trendy these days), the goal is to help us understand the various levels of meaning of a text. This is the meaning of a text in, through, around and beyond the simple linguistic meaning. This is the meaning that is created by what Stanley Fish has called “interpretive communities.” These various interpretations—interpretations often treated as though they *are* the text or are more important than the text itself—are also known to be multiple, always changing across and through time and, in an equally ever-shifting fashion, constantly creating and re-creating the text just as they create and re-create the communities themselves. As John McRae noted in his recent *Seeing Through Zen*, zen texts should not be looked at as records of historical encounters but rather as *texts*, texts that developed inter-textually, that is, through borrowing and making full use of all the community resources that were available.<sup>2</sup> In other words, communities hijack—steal—texts all the time. Even more than literary theory, the obvious fact of shared texts, virtual texts and even sampled texts on the internet (the plagiarized papers that our students submit??) have brought this home as never before—texts are promiscuous, and the community is both the pimp and the condom.

### 3) On a personal note

---

<sup>2</sup> John McRae, *Seeing through Zen [electronic resource] : encounter, transformation, and genealogy in chinese chan buddhism*. Berk ley: University of California Press, 2004, p.

So, in reflecting on the study, translation, and transmission of texts in our field over the past twenty years the first thing that occurs to me is how *our* communities have been enhanced by both the establishment of the Numata Chairs in Buddhist Studies as well as his unflagging attention to the central importance of the text, for, after all, *we* are part of those textual communities, just as are the texts themselves. I began studying Buddhism, quite simply, because of the power of the ideas—ideas that made great sense to me at a time when not much else did. After bouncing through a somewhat typical and somewhat indulgent search for paths to the social good through education, philosophy, guerrilla warfare, Ram Das and other approaches, I discovered the Buddhist tradition and was duly awed by its incredible view of the world and the person in the world. On entering a deeper study of Buddhism I of course encountered the textual tradition and was again bowled over by its richness and depth. I was also bowled over by the sheer size and unwieldy nature of those same texts—Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, Korean, Tibetan, Japanese, Uigher, Tokharian B and many more languages and hundreds of different canonical collections. And then I discovered that there also existed a huge corpus of non-canonical, extra-canonical, apocryphal, and even heretical texts (such as those of the Sanjie movement that have occupied me for some time now), and these days even forgeries of Buddhist texts have come under our scrutiny (perhaps because that was the only way to save the institutional embarrassment at having purchased them in the first place). Professor Akira Fujieda, who I believe was several times the Numata professor here at UC-Berkeley, has contributed hugely to this area of study. All of this has shown much about the stake that we, as academics and, dare I say, as Orientalists, have in the production and transmission of Buddhist texts. I know how excited I was when I discovered a 20<sup>th</sup> century [forgery of a Sanjie ms.](#) that I was studying a number of years ago—a text itself often labeled “spurious” in the traditional Chinese catalogs.<sup>3</sup> And, of course, the way that such forgeries are studied by teams of scientists, calligraphers, philologists, conservators, and the like point to the material culture aspect of the study of texts, as does the economic aspect of procuring texts for libraries and museums. And texts travel to new mediums, from oral to stone, such as the Asokan inscriptions, our first written records of Buddhist texts, and also the other way, from

---

<sup>3</sup> In some ways my encounter with this 20<sup>th</sup> century forgery was even more exciting than my encounter with 12<sup>th</sup> century mss of the Sanjie movement; see See Ochiai Toshinori, *The Manuscripts of Nanatsu-dera: A Recently Discovered Treasure-House in Downtown Nagoya*. With related remarks by Makita Tairya and Antonino Forte. Translated and edited by Silvio Vita. Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies (Occasional Papers Series no. 3) 1991; Hubbard, [“A Report on Newly Discovered Buddhist Texts at Nanatsu-dera.”](#) in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 18/4 (12/91): 401-406.

paper or oral narrative to stone, such as the the bas-reliefs of Sanchi or the rock-cut scriptures of Burma and China. They also end up in amulets worn around the neck and on the Tibetan prayer flags that seem to fly on everybody's front porch these days (including my own) and so many, many other forms of texts that are now being appreciated for what they tell us about the material aspects of the translation and transmission of Buddhist culture.

In any case, I quickly learned, and came to immensely enjoy, that Buddhist studies as practiced in the academy is—or rather, was—largely a philologist's game. And so I was drawn into a community of textual Buddhist studies. The Sanjie movement that I mentioned, for example, was originally made available for study because of the discovery of manuscript texts at Tun-huang and in Japan, texts that had long ago been declared heretical and subversive and therefore kicked out of the Chinese canon—an act that, in the day of the imperially sponsored canon, meant that the text would no longer be copied and/or printed and hence was fated to disappear. So already issues of seventh-century Chinese political communities impinged on my 20<sup>th</sup> century academic textual community, as did the fact that the texts made available were housed in European museums, material artifacts of another sort of political moment in history, a colonial or even imperialist moment, hence a colonized textual community. And let's not forget that in those days of the Vietnam war most of us studied the languages of Buddhist texts via Department of Defense funds (NDFL Title VI) that were offered to study languages deemed to be in the strategic military interest of the US. And, although hardly a final point, I was introduced to the study of the Sanjie by Professor Kazuo Okabe of Komazawa University who was visiting UW-Madison because of his connections with Minoru Kiyota, my adviser. Actually, he didn't introduce me to the study of particular texts, but to the study of scriptural *catalogs*, a good example of the bibliophilic zeal of the Chinese. So already the textual community that I moved in was virtually an Indra's Net of complicated relationships among people, texts, politics, and study.

a) Anti-textism

Discovering the philological roots of modern Buddhist studies was interesting and somewhat ironic for me, as most of the Buddhist texts that I was reading at the time—as well as the direction of Buddhist studies as a field even back then—*downplayed* the importance of texts, albeit for different reasons.

As you all know, Buddhism, unlike the Brahmanic tradition from which it emerged, has nearly always denied scripture as a valid source of knowledge (*pramāna*), preferring direct experience

(*pratyakṣa*) and valid inference (*anumāna*). Vasubandhu, for example, clearly rejected historical and philological criteria for determining what was authentic buddhavaṇa in favor of a philosophical strategy that clearly was responding to the needs of new, Mahāyāna textual communities and is also remarkably similar to hermeneutic strategies of contemporary theorists.<sup>4</sup>

The natural culmination of this tendency is to deny even the one whose words are enshrined in scripture, as in the famous saying, “If, on the path to awakening, you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.” As is well known from the Zen tradition, truth “does not depend on the words and letters” of doctrine and texts but is rather the direct *experience* of a truth specifically transmitted *outside* of the scriptures. This is the position that is best known in the West, and fits well with the anti-institutional spirituality and anti-intellectual experientialism that characterizes much of New Age religiosity and the postmodern philosophies that were coming to full strength back in the sixties and seventies. This is underscored by the further claim that Buddhism is centered on practice rather than texts or the beliefs and doctrines found in texts—that is, Buddhism is about orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, what one *does*, not what one *believes*. Stuart Smithers, for example, recently wrote that the decline of Buddhism in India was occasioned by a shift in emphasis from liberation to monastic concerns, precepts, and book learning, because *real* “Buddhism is defined not as much by an orthodoxy . . . as it is by an orthopraxis.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Reginald Ray’s *Buddhist Saints of India* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1994) argues that the paradigmatic saint in Buddhism is a wandering meditator that was in constant tension with the textual and precept orientation of settled monasticism, which he clearly sees as a betrayal of the true spirit of Buddhist practice. Funny how they can forget the one of the things Buddhists *do* a lot of is texts, and this includes the forest saints that he extols (who also, by all accounts, were—and still are—rigorous in their observation of the precepts as well).<sup>6</sup>

#### b) Within scholarship

---

<sup>4</sup> Cabezón, José Ignacio. “Vasubandhu’s *Vyākhyāyukti* on the Authenticity of the Mahāyāna Sūtras.” In Jeffrey R. Timm, ed., *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Smithers, “[Freedom's Just Another Word](#)” in *Tricycle* 2/1 [Fall 1992], 38–39.

<sup>6</sup> See Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), esp. 93-96; Paul Williams, “Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras,” in *The Eastern Buddhist*, XXXV, 1 & 2, esp. 129-133.

Within the academy too the study of "texts" per se was coming to be seen as completely old-fashioned—that is, the sort of philological tradition, often filtered through the lens of Japanese scholarship, itself largely derived from the European tradition of the Classics, that edits translates a text with a brief introduction to the provenance and content of the text—seems rather out of fashion these days. Decentered and deconstructed by Derrida and politicized by Foucault and Orientalized by Said and semioticized by Saussure and Barthes (everything is a sign, everything is a text, and therefore nothing is a text) and undermined by an entire generation of eager followers, the text has been exposed as the concern of the elite, a reflection of the DWEM fetish (**Dead White Euro Male**), and the preoccupation with the text as simply text nothing but more of the same. As Greg Schopen describes the Buddhist version of the DWEM, they are “obscure monk scholars,” and “small, literate, almost exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalized subgroups.”<sup>7</sup> Even the Taishō tripitika, the seminal contribution of Watanabe Kaigyoku and Takakusu Junjiro and a source of inspiration for Yehan Numata, has come to be seen as an example of Taishō era nationalism, a “vast and grave task” that was part of a project to assert the place of Japan on the “world-historical stage.” This is also seen to be somewhat ironic since the editors of the Taishō used a version of Western modernist scholarship to accomplish that task—a modernism characterized by a kind of fascination with texts as the origin of a modern, rationalized religion—what has come to be called “Protestant Buddhism.”

Buddhist studies of course followed this academic trend, at least in the US, as we kept up with our colleagues in other fields and entire new ways of looking at Buddhist culture blossomed in the place of what was once a fairly solid textual approach. Even in the texts that we did study we were exhorted to look for the overlooked, texts that were strange or seemed out of place, or at least reflected ritual, ideology, sermons, economics or conflict instead of doctrine and tradition—the “accidental canon,” the forgotten things that we had leftover on our hard drives, in one case. Gregory Schopen, for example, has been one of the strongest voices for the need to look at what Buddhists actually *did*, rather than what they *said* in texts about what they did. And so it is, thankfully, that cultural criticism, social history, studies of ritual, gender, monuments, economics, legal matters, material culture, and the like have flourished, wonderfully enriching our understanding of Buddhist

---

<sup>7</sup>Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 114.

culture. I too have had my share of critical and theoretical moments, especially during my earlier years and the heyday of the so-called “*hihan bukkuyō*” or “critical Buddhism.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, I wonder whether the kind of textual translation and analysis that dominated the field when I began could pass for a Ph.D. these days, and I seriously doubt that an edition or translation—no matter how accomplished, no matter how difficult the original text—could get you tenure or promotion at most major research institutions in the US. For example, I am currently working on a translation of the *Yuimagyō-gisho*, attributed to Shōtoku Taishi, and a few years ago I was quite disappointed to hear that a grad student doing the translation of the sister text, the *Shomangyō-gisho*, got a new dissertation advisor and was told to forget the translation and just work on the wider social-cultural issues. Perhaps, though, that is to be expected, inasmuch as there has never been much of academic tradition of the study of the Classics in the United States and many of us find ourselves in religion departments rather than area studies or linguistics departments.

c) Texts still studied

On the other hand, less well-known perhaps but thankfully more often practiced than the assassinations of Buddhas met upon the path, nearly every collection of Buddhist scriptures—from the recitation by Ananda at the very first council to the edition of the *tripitaka* prepared at the Sixth Council in Burma some fifty years ago to the publication of the many digital versions of the Buddhist scriptures that monks and we now use to the BDK digital publication project—was prompted by the heartfelt desire to accurately preserve and thereby transmit the texts containing the words of the Buddha. The same goes for Mr. Numata’s goal of translating the Chinese scriptures as well as his distribution of *The Teachings of Buddha* in nearly 40 languages throughout the world (if you travel to Buddhist Asia you will see that text next to the Gideon Bible in hotel rooms everywhere). There are also many other more traditional forms of the text: prayer flags with scriptural verses fluttering in the wind, symbolically spreading the word of the Buddha to all directions; vast libraries of Buddhist texts everywhere, some contained in giant drums thirty or more

---

<sup>8</sup> See [Hubbard, Jamie](#), “Premodern, modern, and postmodern: Doctrine and the study of Japanese religion,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* March 1991 (19/1), 3–27. This was a response to [McMullin, Neil](#), “Historical and historiographical issues in the study of pre-modern Japanese religions,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* March 1989 (16/1), 3–40; see also his rejoinder: [McMullin, Neil](#), “Which doctrine? Whose “religion”? A rejoinder. in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* March 1991 (19/1), 29–39. For *hihan bukkuyō*, see the online version of [Pruning the Bodhi Tree](#) (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997)



feet around that can be revolved in order to circulate the Buddhist scriptures throughout the universe; painted depictions of scriptural stories; and of course monks and laity alike reverencing the scriptures in a multitude of ways, from memorization, chanting, study, and commentary to copying, ornamenting, and other ritualized forms of honoring the text. Even in the highly scholastic tradition of Tibetan debate—which closely follows the logical systems that deny scripture validity as a means of knowledge—recourse to scriptural authority is the most common—and unassailable—means of proof. The *Lotus Sutra* goes so far as to declare that any who even copies a single line of the text will attain innumerable merits and eventually achieve perfect enlightenment, an attitude that aptly reflects what has come to be called the “cult of the book.” It is thus no accident at all that in Chinese the collection of Buddhist texts is called [ta tsang ching](#) 大藏經, the “Great Treasure House of Scriptures.” Hsüan-tsang, for example, obviously felt quite strongly that the words of the Buddha were not to be torn up or used for firewood—on the contrary, as with Buddhists everywhere and in every time, Hsüan-tsang was willing to go to great lengths to secure the accurate transmission of the Buddha-dharma.

This side of Buddhist culture thus considers the faithful transmission of each and every word of the historical Buddha’s teaching of utmost importance, and strives to be as literal as possible, adding nothing and leaving nothing out. It was the need for a standardized body of teachings that led to the first council or “recounting” of the dharma (*saṃgīti*, usually translated as “council”) after the passing of the Buddha, and, as we can see the same purpose in the “[sixth council](#)” that was convened in Burma in the 1950’s with the express purpose of “preserving the original word of the Buddha” and the [frontispiece](#) to their edition of the canon boldly dedicates this purpose: “*Ciraṃ Tiṭṭhatu Saddhammo-- May the True Teaching Endure for A Long Time!*” This [frontispiece](#) (reproduced in each of the 140 published volumes) also cites two passages from the scriptures concerning the preservation of the *saddhamma*: “There are two things, O monks, which make the True Teaching endure for a long time, without any distortion and without (fear of) eclipse. Which two? Proper placement of words and their natural [correct] interpretation. Words properly placed help also in their natural [correct] interpretation” and “. . . the dhammas [truths] which I have taught to you . . . should be recited by all, in concert and without dissension, in uniform version collating meaning with meaning and wording with wording. In this way, this teaching with pure practice will last long and endure for a long time. . .”

And so too Buddhist texts to continue to be studied in the academy, and, thanks to such projects as the Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, continue to be translated and transmitted to ever new audiences. With what Rob Gimello, another previous holder of a Numata Chair, once called our self-flagellation over some of the critical issues abating somewhat, the importance of the philological work continues. Just as a university's department of comparative literature depends on the university's curriculum of language instruction, our study of the text in community, whether the author's community, the readers community, in a particular time or place or across time and space, locally or globalized, actual or virtual—requires the basic philological and textual work if it is to go forward. The continued importance of the text in Buddhist studies is particularly seen in Europe, Japan, and India.

In addition to the linguistic meaning this work also requires attention to the technology and medium of those texts, both of which have changed several times over the millennia. For example, Joseph Walser and others have pointed out that the oral reproduction of scripture required a variety of different resources in order to survive at the very same time that it dictated the form and content of what did survive (the vinaya even includes punishments for those who drop the ball and lose the oral tradition of a text). The beginnings of written texts had similar constraints, both physical—palm leaves, for example, while making possible a wider dissemination of texts, are a fairly fragile medium, and we don't have many remaining copies of these early written scriptures—and socio-political—a key part of Gombrich's argument about the importance of written texts in the origins of the Mahāyāna. So too the use of printing blocks and paper in place of stylus, ink, and palm leaves had a monumental impact on both the closure of the canon as well as exposure to that canon. We can think of the Chinese case mentioned above, where imperially sanctioned collections of texts dictated what would be printed and what would not, and hence what would survive and what would not—all at the same time printing enabled those texts to circulate much more widely than ever before possible. It has always fascinated me, for example, that, due to a fluke in one of the Chinese catalogs of canonical works, texts of the Sanjie movement were still being copied in late 12<sup>th</sup> century Japan, nearly 500 years after having been banned in China. On another level, it is also quite fascinating to ponder the question of why a nobleman at the end of the Heian period was paying to copy the Chinese Buddhist canon rather than buying more swords and spears, but that is another question.

4) New technologies

Printed  
text

Nanatsu-  
dera

Well. Of course the newest technology on the block is digital technology, a major change from the way that we used to interact with texts. I began my graduate studies with an electric typewriter and finished it with an Apple II, and what I am using some twenty years later is almost beyond belief. At the time I was learning about texts I was already dreaming about where we be going and what the implications of these new technologies would be for my study and research. Well, over twenty years later and we are able to do much of what I used to dream about. All of us, I am sure, have long been using the various digital versions of Buddhist texts, and combined with online dictionaries and other research tools my task has been made much easier—I can check references quickly, and I can search instantly across vast amounts of material with little worry that I will miss a reference because of my tired old eyes. I am even reclaiming bookshelves, as I recently donated my entire copy of the *Taishō Sakuin*—indices to the Taishō canon—to my library since I can search the electronic texts so much more quickly and efficiently (and get a tax deduction to boot). Click [here](#) for a demonstration (already outdated) on how to receive stolen (Buddhist) goods.

It is also interesting to me that Mr. Numata always seemed to know that texts were at the heart of the matter, and that texts were commodities that required financial support as well. As he himself put it many years ago, “No matter how high the ideals are, if the financial base is not solid, one cannot expect to accomplish his goals.” And so it was his genius to not simply go on, as the rest of us did, to study and translate texts, but rather to return to Japan and pursue an extremely successful business career that enabled the establishment of the various philanthropic foundations that implement his vision of the translation and transmission of Buddhist texts as well as the academic study of Buddhism, and much, much more.

Mr. Numata’s vision was always generous, and always far-seeing. He was a scientist and engineer, after all, and Mitsutoyo is one of the most high-tech companies in the world. It was nearly 25 years ago, for example, when I first approached him with the idea of digital publications, and I received a grant from the BDK to begin investigating what digitizing Buddhist scriptures would require. Yehan Numata’s dream was always to make Buddhist texts as completely accessible as possible, \*and\* he expected his work to be improved upon in the future. From the preface to each volume of the translation series:

“It is my greatest wish to see this done [that is, the translation of the entire Buddhist canon into English] and to make the translations available to the many English-speaking people who have never had the opportunity to learn about the Buddha’s teachings...At the same

time, I hope that an improved, revised edition will appear in the future...May the rays of the Wisdom of the Compassionate One reach each and every person in the world.” Yehan Numata, August 7, 1991.

And so I was extremely pleased when, during a gathering of some of the BDK translators last summer a tentative decision to publish on-line versions of the texts was announced. With John McRae, the new head of the publication committee, together with myself, Charles Muller, Christian Wittern, Hudaya Kanjaya, and Yonezawa Yoshiyasu we quickly put together a plan to implement as open and extendible version of the BDK translations as we could possibly imagine.

The concern for the accurate preservation and transmission of the Buddha-dharma that led to the First Council as well as to the carving of the canon in stone is well served, then, by the momentous occasion of the publication of the digital version of the BDK texts. Less expensive to produce, more widely disseminated, and easily updated, the lasting value of this important contribution to the world is assured.

But, since we are asking ourselves about the changes over the past twenty years and electronic texts and the internet are the biggest and most obvious innovations not just in the past several decades but probably since the arrival of movable type, we can also ask whether anything is really any different, even with regard to the textual communities that I spoke of earlier. And here, I think, the answer is that much has not really changed. Though we can do things faster than ever before and the virtual readership and even authorship of texts is perhaps more obvious to us than ever before, the fact of texts studied, translated, and transmitted in communities far-flung as well as local, synchronically or diachronically in time, and the heterogeneous nature of those interpretive communities and our place within those communities has not changed much. And so I still love sitting at my desk working on a text, with 30 or 40 dictionaries open on my screen (and, occasionally, in printed form on my desk), combing through Chinese texts and Japanese academic journals, online translations, commentaries, and the like, trying to make sense of the text. Those texts are dearly loved members of my community, whether printed or on a server in Tokyo. And I give my heartfelt thanks to Mr. Yehan Numata, his son Toshihide Numata, and the BDK for both the Numata Chair at Smith College that pays my salary but especially for their vision and generous assistance in enabling all of us to continue the job of studying, translating, and transmitting Buddhist texts in our own textual communities.

