Distinguished Translator Sheds Light on Earliest Buddhist Culture

"Long ago, I was the son of a wealthy merchant. I took care of my father, my brothers, my sister and my household, but I abused my mother, and instead of feeding her, I said, 'Eat stones!' and as a result of that evil act, for eons I dwell in hell..."

Richard Salomon sits alone, squinting through a magnifying glass. The 2,000-year-old scroll he peruses is mottled, blistered, frayed as a rag; but its value to scholars is inestimable. The story he has translated is part of the oldest significant surviving collection of texts from any of the Buddhist traditions. Salomon is but one of a handful of scholars in the world capable of translating these particular scrolls, perhaps the only one in this hemisphere.

At the invitation of the India Studies Program, Salomon, who is a professor of Asian Languages (Sanskrit) at the University of Washington, presented a lecture in late March on these first century A.D. manuscripts, known as the "British Library Kharosthi Scrolls," and on his efforts to reconstruct early Indian Buddhism in the ancient Gandhara region (corresponding to modern northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan).

They were found in one of five large clay pots turned over to the British Library by an anonymous donor who had purchased them from an antiquities dealer, also anonymous. When the pots were opened, the scrolls looked like squashed oversized cigars. Each scroll must be painstakingly unrolled, treated, and preserved flat under glass. Little else is known about how or even where the scrolls were found, depriving Salomon's project of continuity, clues, and contextual information, which he admits is a common problem in the field.

Salomon, a past recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, reads 12 languages and dialects. He has devoted much of the last two years to the Kharosthi Scrolls. As the translations unfold, he hopes to reveal the crucial role, long suspected but until now unproved, that the Gandhara region played in the development of early Buddhist literature and scholasticism, and in the spread of Buddhism to Central Asia, and thence to China and East Africa. What he eventually finds could have a profound effect on the way scholars and practitioners alike look at these processes and could shape a new debate on the formation of Buddhist canons as they are known from later sources.

For the moment, Salomon is just reading and preserving what, centuries ago, others felt was important enough to write down. This is not second-hand reporting: these are the words and handwriting of the original authors. He sees the project not so much as a work of history, but as genuine communication with a lost language community.

Like his grandfather, an academician and dean of the philosophy faculty at the University of Hamburg, Salomon began studying Latin in high school and soon became interested in antiquities and ancient cultures. He began his study of Sanskrit in college and realized he had a love and a talent for it. "I got the bug. I had to do it. I was blessed, and I suppose cursed, to know very clearly what I was meant to do," he says.

The lecture was co-sponsored by the India Studies Program, the Indiana Network for the Development of India Awareness, the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center and the Dept. of Central Eurasian Studies.

"Here I am working with these things produced by the monks in my imaginary scriptorium who probably sat there day after day copying text," says Salomon. "It was their lives. In a sense, it is mine, too. I feel a connection between their desks and mine in a very real sense."

—Elizabeth Jasper
India Studies Coord.

—Richard Salomon, pictured here with Kemal Silay, NELC