

OBITUARY

A Tribute to Professor Luis O. Gómez (1943–2017)



When I received that telephone call from Mexico City on September 3, 2017 from Ms. Lourdes Gómez Vergara, Professor Gómez's partner, I knew immediately that it was sad news. Luis Gómez had passed away. In my wildest dreams I never imagined that he would die at the age of 74. I was completely caught off guard.

In his final email to me on August 5, he wrote: "Dealing with this recalcitrant and capricious disease, I have decided to leave some instructions so people are not taken by surprise." He ended the letter stating that "the cancer most likely will move slowly, but, in the meantime, heart and kidneys have suffered some damage, so that slows me down." Still, and probably so as not to worry me, he kindly added the words, "If I come up to Berkeley, I will let you know."

When I think of Professor Gómez, a kaleidoscopic array of memories come flooding back: his impressive and sincere passion for learning; his precise philological and comparative approach to texts; the way he was able to handle at least ten languages; the deep care he had for the meaning that texts seek to relate; and the way he would passionately discuss both the theory and practice of Mahayana Buddhism with such keen insight. As a person, he was full of wit and had a big heart, and as a practicing clinical psychologist, he cared deeply for his patients.

I remember my initial impression of Professor Gómez as if it were yesterday. I first met him in the conference room of the Berkeley Higashi Honganji

Temple: a calm, composed scholar, deep in thought, with glasses as thick as the bottom of milk bottles on his smiling face. He was youthful and charming. I am overcome with emotion whenever I think of the personal friendship we shared thereafter. While he will, of course, be remembered as one of the greatest Buddhist scholars, to me he will always be the older brother who was one year my senior.

I can honestly say that my friendship with Professor Gómez was an instance of the mysterious serendipity that Buddha provides. Now let us go back in time fifty years . . .

In September of 1967, an older associate of mine, Ichigō Masamichi (currently president of, and a professor at, Kyoto Koka Women's University and head priest of Shinshōji, a temple of the Shinshū Otani-ha), went to study under Professor Edward Conze at Washington University in Seattle as a Fulbright scholar. It was there that he made the chance acquaintance of Professor Gómez who had been teaching there from that September. After spending one year in Seattle, Professor Gómez went on to become associate professor in the philosophy department at the Universidad de Puerto Rico. In 1973 he moved to the University of Michigan as associate professor of Buddhist Studies. Professor Gómez first visited Japan in 1968, and at the urging of Ichigō Masamichi, he chose to be a visiting research fellow at Kyoto University.

In 1982, Ichigō Masamichi, now a professor at Kyoto Sangyō University, visited me at the Berkeley Higashi Honganji Temple where I was the resident minister. We lamented the fact that there was as yet no reliable translation of the Sukhāvativyūha Sutras (the Three Pure Land Scriptures: *The Sutra on the Buddha of Measureless Light*; *The Sutra on Amida Buddha*; and *The Sutra on Visualization of the Buddha of Measureless Light*), the fundamental texts for studying the teachings of Shinran. We agreed that this would be a suitable undertaking for the Shinshū Otani organization to support, and that it would be best for a single scholar to be entrusted with the translation rather than having it done by a committee. It was then that Professor Ichigō said that Professor Luis Gómez of Michigan University was just the person for such a task. This was the first time that I heard his name. After returning to Japan, Professor Ichigō sent me a copy of Professor Gómez's article "Shinran's Faith and the Sacred Name of Amida" (*Monumenta Nipponica* 38, no. 1, 1983). It was upon reading this that I deeply wanted to meet him.

If I remember correctly, it was in 1985 that the then head of the Shinshū Otani-ha office, Seiji Koga, met with Professor Ichigō, and it was decided that I should meet with Professor Gómez to discuss the translation project

here in Berkeley, as he was a visiting research fellow at nearby Stanford University. He listened while I explained the plans of the translation project proposed by Higashi Honganji, hardly asking any questions. “I’d like to think it over,” he said in a soft voice. That was the beginning of our deep acquaintance that wound up spanning more than thirty years.

As a preliminary to the start of the translation project, a symposium with Professor Gómez was held in 1986 in the conference room at the Higashi Honganji administration building. At that time, he made extremely suggestive and stimulating comments about the process of translating scripture. To the question, “Why is it necessary to translate the Three Pure Land Scriptures into English?” he stated that we can think of this as integral to the next “turning of the wheel” of Buddhist history—the transplanting of the Dharma in the English-speaking world. He continued, discussing the translation of Buddhist scriptures in a general sense:

The kind of people who naturally are moved by Buddhism have no need for scriptures. Translations are for those people who continue to study about Buddhism and who regard guidance as necessary. . . . The sectarian attitude toward reading a text is one which sees the interpretation as embedded in the text. A nonsectarian translation looks at the scripture on its own, before any sectarian ideas are introduced. Thus, as far as ideas are concerned, it allows the text to speak for itself. My approach to the translation of Buddhist scriptures differs from both of these. It starts with the premise that there is no need to view the Buddhist canon in the same way that my predecessors did. While my predecessors saw the canon as sacred, can we really say that they did research on the texts and approached them in a spirit of critical inquiry? . . . It is my hope that this project will be the first stage towards a type of scholarship that brings out the essence of the scriptures, condenses and presents this to the reader, and provides commentaries to the most important ones (*Shinshū* 真宗, July 1986, p. 53).

This hope has been amply realized in the section introductions and glossary provided by Professor Gómez in his finished product, *The Land of Bliss, The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light: The Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvativyūha Sūtras*, which was published jointly by the University of Hawai‘i Press and Shinshū Otani-ha Higashi Honganji in 1996.

The undertaking of this English translation took ten years to complete. Before publishing his English translation, Professor Gómez made at least

five drafts. And during this period, this was not the only work that he was engaged in. From 1988 he began graduate studies in clinical psychology at the University of Michigan, completing a PhD in this field in 1998. Though he was supposed to end his duties as chair of the Buddhist Studies department about the time he began the translation project, he continued in this role through 1989. Also, during this ten-year period, his computer crashed on two occasions, causing further setbacks. On top of all this, his eyesight deteriorated almost to the point of blindness due, in my opinion, to exhaustion from excessive work on his scholarship and professorial duties. Nevertheless, he miraculously completed the translation and bestowed it upon the world. As Professor Ichigō and I were deeply convinced from the very beginning that there was no one else besides Professor Gómez who could accomplish this translation, we continued to ask the sponsor of the project, Higashi Honganji, for their patience at the delay in publication.

In August of 2015, Professor Gómez was the keynote speaker at an International Shinshū Conference held at the Center for Buddhist Education in Berkeley, where he gave a lecture that touched upon the *myōkōnin* Asahara Saiichi (1850–1932). About two days before the lecture, he said that while he was going to use Daisetsu Suzuki's translation of a poem by Asahara in his lecture, he would like to see the original. When I showed him a copy of Suzuki's edited volume of Asahara's works published by the Shunjusha press in 1967 and found for him the original poem, he was absolutely overjoyed. I will never forget his beaming face as he embraced the volume with both hands as if he were cradling an infant. He seemed so completely taken by the book that I panicked a bit and had to tell him, "Hey, I'm not giving you the book! You can't take it back to Mexico with you!" He replied, "What if I were to leave it in my office at the Mangalam Institute [in Berkeley]?" And so I agreed to lend it to him. I became excited at the thought that Professor Gómez might write a tract on Asahara offering another perspective than that of Suzuki's, but sadly, this was not to be.

It was about 2013, I believe, when, after having had dinner with Professor Gómez in Berkeley one evening, we were walking through the parking lot and he asked me, "So, now that you're retired, do you have any plans?" After his own retirement from the University of Michigan in 2008, where he was honored with the title of "professor emeritus," he began teaching at the Colegio de México in Mexico City with the rank of *Profesor Investigador*. At the same time, he also became academic director of the Mangalam Research Center for Buddhism, a research center in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. As he was so active, he must have pitied me for not doing much

of anything since retiring. And it is this pity, I think, that prompted his question to me. At the time, although I had already finished a first draft of my translation into English of Yamaguchi Susumu's book *Daijō to shite no jōdo*, it was in no way ready for publication and, moreover, I was beginning to think that I did not have the ability to finish the project and was on the verge of giving up on it. Out of desperation to respond to his question, I answered vaguely, "Well, I'm thinking of perhaps translating some Japanese book about Pure Land Buddhism into English." Professor Gómez instantaneously shot back, "Why not translate Yamaguchi Susumu's *Daijō to shite no jōdo*?" I was utterly astonished. What an extraordinary coincidence! It made me realize just how valuable he recognized this work to be for Mahayana Buddhists in the English-speaking world, and especially for those who were learning about Jōdo Shinshū.

In 1983, Professor Gómez delivered a lecture entitled "Buddhism as a Religion of Hope" at Otani University's Comprehensive Research Institute for Shin Buddhist Studies. This lecture formed the basis for his article "Buddhism as a Religion of Hope: Observations on the 'Logic' of a Doctrine and its Foundational Myth," published in *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 32, no. 1, in 2000. In both the lecture and the article, he discussed Yamaguchi's book as follows:

Pure Land Buddhism is consistent with mainstream Mahāyāna. The idea of a traditional link between Mahāyāna and Japanese Pure Land tradition was first inspired in me in an all too brief conversation with Professor Yamaguchi Susumu in 1969, and later when I read his arguments in *Daijō to shite no Jōdo* (Pure Land as Mahāyāna). He saw the fundamental link in the formula "emptiness is form, form is emptiness." Of course, the connection between this doctrinal dictum and Pure Land generally had been suggested long before, in the writings of T'an-luan. But Professor Yamaguchi made the connection to Japanese Pure Land and tried to see the link as a necessary one. That is, Pure Land doctrine was seen as a logical outcome of the nature of the synonymity or equation (*sokuze*) "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (p. 20).

I wanted Professor Gómez to read the final draft of my translation of Professor Yamaguchi's book before sending it off to be published, but I was not in time.

Last year, on September 3, while I was performing a memorial service for my dear friend before our personal altar and was chanting the *Sutra on Amida*

Buddha, my spouse quietly placed by my knee an elegant cardboard square that is used in Japan to write poems on. Once, when we had invited Professor Gómez to dinner at our home in Berkeley in 1992, we had a particularly lovely evening. To express the joy of that evening, Professor Gómez took the decorative square and wrote the following line upon it: “That we meet again in the Pure Land . . . with all sentient beings.” In the midst of my sorrow, these words leave me with hope as I carry on with my life . . .

Imai Akinori

(Translated by John LoBreglio)