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THE LIFE AND REVELATIONS OF PEMA LINGPA

SARAH HARDING

REVIEWED BY ANNE Z. PARKER, PHD.

Sarah Harding's *The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa* is a significant contribution to Himalayan history and Buddhist literature. It adds substantially to the limited English language literature available on Bhutan. It brings to life two key historical figures, one from Bhutan and one from Tibet: Pema Lingpa, a teacher, mystic, and treasure revealer; and Padmasambhava, the great and timeless teacher whose works he revealed. Pema Lingpa was a Buddhist saint, well known throughout the Himalayas, but particularly beloved in his own country of Bhutan as a folk hero and spiritual master. This text is unusual in its appeal to both the expert and the general audience, from those seeking accessible and excellent Buddhist teachings to those wishing to understand Bhutanese and Tibetan cultural history.

The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa is an excellent exploration of the Himalayan "treasure revealer" tradition in which there is a conjunction of the past and present. Pema Lingpa writes in the fifteenth century, revealing stories hidden from the time of Padmasambhava in the eighth century. Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, is famous for his contribution to establishing Buddhism in Tibet and for his foresight in secreting teachings for later discovery and religious revival. The great teacher himself prophesied the individuals who were to find these teachings. Holy objects or scrolls were hidden in caves or cliffs, or sometimes in the mind stream of certain disciples. Pema Lingpa located this text in Medok Cliff in Lhodrak, southern Tibet. During his life he discovered many hidden teachings throughout Bhutan and north of its current borders. Holly Gayley's valuable introduction sets the texts in their historical and cultural context, fully exploring the role that treasure revealing has played in Himalayan worldview and history.

The text itself is in the very delightful and tangibly

human form of dialogues. The characters bring the life and times of Padmasambhava into vivid focus in the conversations and the details of their lives as members of the royal court. The teachings come alive through the personalities of these characters as they encounter the great teacher and request teachings from him. From topics ranging from impermanence to Dzogchen, concise answers are given that are directly applicable to daily life. The advice relevant then remains valuable today. The characters in the dialogues come to life through their doubts, concerns, and aspirations, and they are offered appropriate instructions.

Three of the central characters are women, who raise concerns regarding women's ability to follow a spiritual path. There is indeed encouragement for them and their full capacity to engage in spiritual practice. It is, however, a bit of a mixed message. While women are seen as having spiritual potential, their lives are described as fraught with limitation due to their sex and due to the notion that a male rebirth would be better. This does, of course, accurately reflect the historical and cultural perspective of both centuries in which the stories emerge. It is clear, however, that Padmasambhava's view is that faith and diligence determine spiritual progress, not gender.

Sarah Harding brings to this translation her expertise as a scholar and translator and as a Buddhist practitioner. Translations are most skillful when the translator understands the context and purpose of the material they are translating – which is true in this case. The result is a valuable and accessible contribution to the English language literature on Bhutan, to the Tibeto-Himalayan treasure tradition, and to the cultural history of the Himalayan region.

The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa

Sarah Harding

New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2003. Pp vii + 280, 8 plates.