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THE LIFE AND REVELATIONS OF PEMA LINGPA

TRANSLATED BY SARAH HARDING, FORWARD BY GANGTENG RINPOCHE

REVIEWED BY D. PHILLIP STANLEY

The Bhutanese Buddhist master Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) is considered one of the Five Kings of the “Treasure-Finders” (tertön, gter ston) in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. This book contains translations of six texts related to Pema Lingpa, a history of the incarnations of Pema Lingpa by the Eighth Sungtrul Rinpoche (1843-1891), and five texts from Pema Lingpa’s treasure cycle, the Lama Jewel Ocean, which he discovered in 1507. The first four of Pema Lingpa’s texts are “dialogues between master and disciple set in the royal period” of eighth century Tibet (25), while the fifth recounts the history of the cycle, though it is primarily a history of the miraculous life of Padmasambhava, the famed concealer of most treasure texts. This text concludes with Padmasambhava’s concealment of this cycle and the prophecy that Princess Pemasal

will rediscover it as Pema Lingpa.

The book is a collaborative effort. In addition to the six translations by Sarah Harding that form the bulk and heart of the book, there is a foreward by Gangteng Rinpoche, a brief preface by Sarah Harding, an extended introduction by Holly Gayley, and two appendices, one listing the incarnations of the Pema Lingpa tradition compiled by John Ardussi, and one providing a catalog of the texts in Pema Lingpa’s Collection of Treasures compiled by Holly Gayley. There is no index but there is a useful bibliography.

As indicated in the foreward, the book was initiated by Gangteng Rinpoche himself. Sarah Harding, whom Gangteng invited to Bhutan to do the translations, notes that the first Gangteng Rinpoche was the grandson of Pema Lingpa and that the ninth

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Gangteng Rinpoche continues this line as “an authentic representative of the Pema Lingpa tradition and a lineage holder” (xi). Gangteng Rinpoche guided the selection of the texts to be translated and he contributed directly to the translation. The translations thus are oriented to presenting a traditional picture of Pema Lingpa’s life and teachings.

Holly Gayley’s introduction presents an overview of the elaborate traditional framework that roots the activities of a treasure finder in a worldview of cosmic proportions. The treasure texts, and indeed all phenomena, are understood as arising from a basic nature of intrinsic purity. Padmasambhava describes this nature to Princess Pemasal as the pristine wisdom personified as “Samantabhadra, masculine and feminine, devoid of any existential existence” within “the citadel of naturally occurring primordial purity in the totally pure realm of reality” (121). Gayley links this material to the specific context of Pema Lingpa’s life and work, and describes how his treasure tradition helped create a sacred geography and a regional identity for the Bhutanese people. She also briefly notes traditional and modern skepticism over the miraculous claims of the treasure finders.

Three of the dialogues present Padmasambhava’s personal instructions to Princess Pemasal, Princess Trompa Gyen, and Prince Mutik Tsenpo, three members of the royal family of King Trisong Detsun (755-797), a pivotal figure in the transmission and establishment of Buddhism in Tibetan. The dialogue with Pemasal is the longest. It consists primarily of pithy, often evocative teachings on tantra and of prophecies about her future rebirth as Pema Lingpa. The second dialogue with Trompa Gyen begins with a poetic lament about the woes of womanhood and her yearning to escape cyclic existence, which are themes that appear more briefly in the first dialogue. The remainder of the dialogue also consists of pithy instructions on tantric practices and on the immediacy of tantric realization. Padmasambhava exhorts Trompa Gyen:

Now for the essence of mind. The innately radiant emptiness of the expanse and awareness is the stainless dharma-awareness. Innate radiance without fixation shines from that; it is the pristine wisdom of compassion. It is the perspective of all the victorious ones, Great Completion, the pinnacle of the meaning of secret Mantra. Whoever practices this will reach the ultimate fruition accordingly . . . Princess, practice in this way and you will accomplish buddhahood in this life. (96)

The third dialogue with Princess Dorje Tso tells how she, as a village girl working as a weaver who is “fifteen or sixteen years of age . . . endowed with the thirty-six signs of a dakini,” chooses to become the consort of one of Padmasambhava’s

students, Namkhai Nyingpo. Rather than remain and enter the inevitable life that awaits her as a housewife in the village, she flees in the middle of the night with Namkhai Nyingpo and eventually becomes Princess Dorje Tso in Trisong Detsun’s court. The dialogue reveals her doubts, fears, and aspirations as she pursues her path until finally attaining the highest realization.

The fourth and final dialogue is with Prince Mutik Tsenpo. He seeks teachings from Padmasambhava that are “short, pithy . . . from your own experience . . . easy to understand . . . and personally effective to my practice” (115). The prince diligently practices the teachings he receives and returns to recount his experience. In the classic style of the Great Completion (Dzogchen), Padmasambhava undercuts the prince’s attachment to his new realizations, saying, “Prince, you are fooled by fixation to the validity of your experience. . . [Y]ou need to be free from attachment to this appearance. Are you? . . . If . . . not . . . , there is no one more useless than you.” Padmasambhava continues in this vein, exhorting the prince to deeper understanding.

A recurring theme in the first three dialogues is the difficulty of pursuing a spiritual path as a woman, given the repressive cultural conditions that can beset women. It is striking that Gangteng Rinpoche explicitly states in his foreword that affirming the spiritual capacity of women was integral to his motivation in undertaking this book. Harding affirms that this positive assessment of the spiritual capacity of women is present in the dialogues of the three women, who “Each in her own way learns to fulfill this precious human life and achieve ultimate realization” (xi). However, she voices the concerns of modern women practitioners by observing:

[Padmasambhava’s] voice of timeless wisdom tells them that indeed it is a repressive situation that needs to be overcome. Not, as we might wish now, though rectifying and improving it, but by leaving it utterly behind...[through] the radically alternative lifestyle of a yogin: homeless and unattached... (xi)

The book thus not only brings us into the world of the life and teachings of Pema Lingpa under the guidance of a traditional Bhutanese lineage holder, but hints at how such a tradition may evolve and adapt as it enters the lives of Westerners who aspire to change their world.

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