

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 15, 2020

Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: The Third Karmapa and the Invention of a Tradition

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RUTH GAMBLE, *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: The Third Karmapa and the Invention of a Tradition*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018. XVI, 322 pp. CAN \$108.99 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-069077-9

Adapted from her PhD dissertation, Gamble's *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism* is the first book-length treatment of the origin of the tulku tradition in Tibetan Buddhism and of the man credited with its invention, Rangjung Dorjé. The book is divided into two distinct yet related sections: an exploration of the religious, socio-cultural, and physical landscape that shaped Rangjung Dorjé's understanding of himself as a reincarnate master, and a critical history of Rangjung Dorjé, drawing from both his autobiographies and other primary sources from his lineage. In doing so, it sheds light on how the tradition of reincarnated lamas came to be. In the introduction, Gamble writes: "With his recognition of Rangjung Dorjé, Orgyenpa had done something seminal in Tibetan Buddhism: For the first time, he had introduced a third member of a reincarnation lineage. The reappearance of a Karmapa in the world was no longer a singular event; it was recast as a tradition" (2). *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism* explores the consequences of this event and the inputs that made it possible.

The first half of the book is split into four chapters, each analyzing one of the four main factors responsible for shaping this tradition: prior lifetimes, family and Buddhist lineages, religious and cultural communities, and physical landscapes. These categories inform how Tibetans understood Rangjung Dorjé as a reincarnate and how he, in turn, understood himself. The chapters are mostly supported by Tibetan literature but also include the occasional reference to western academic the-

ory which help readers without extensive Tibetan Buddhist background to approach Rangjung Dorjé, the spaces he inhabited, and the people with whom he interacted. However, while each chapter would stand well on its own as a cohesive paper, the four together lack a united *telos* and, aside from the thread of the Karmapa throughout, seem theoretically disjointed from one another. Further, the placement of the chapters *before* the narrative of Rangjung Dorjé can force some of the analysis to be lost for those without prior knowledge of the Third Karmapa. That said, by preceding the critical biography, they allow the reader to engage with Rangjung Dorjé's life in greater depth, which helps colour his narrative in the second half of the book.

The book begins by detailing the various narratives of Rangjung Dorjé's predecessors, Düsum Khyenpa and Karma Paksi, and explains how "the Karmapas' narratives had helped shape a tradition, and this tradition had, in turn, reshaped Tibetans' understanding of their history" (42). It covers the origins of the title "Karmapa" (27) up to the naturalization of the lineage in golden rosary texts (40) and examines the interplay between history and narrative.

Chapter Two investigates the role of both filial and religious lineages in conferring authority in Tibetan society. Gamble examines how Rangjung Dorjé is related to the three main lineages: family, monastic, and tantric, in different ways. She writes, for example, "The accident of his low birth and his—perhaps related—insistence that monastic vows remove people from social stratifications combine to make him something of a social critic" (51). However, more imperative to his acceptance as the Karmapa is the way in which he places himself in a tantric lineage of Tilopa and Nāropa down to his predecessors, Düsum Khyenpa and Karma Pakshi (62-63). Gamble argues that this lineage, in conjunction with the Karmapa's association with Avalokiteśvara, is imperative to the

success of his reincarnation within the tradition because “the more lineages braided into the Karmapa rosary, the harder it was to break” (50).

Chapter Three looks at how the Karmapa was supported by both local and cross-continental communities and how their patronage bestowed social, political, and religious power on Rangjung Dorjé. It shows how these communities have “always been plural: communities rather than a community” and that they have served as “the Karmapas’ followers, its sponsors, and its audience” (78). It also gestures to the contemporary relevance of this analysis, for “it was also these families, communities, and networks that supported—and sometimes thwarted—the reincarnation tradition as it developed, and it continues to depend on these networks for support today” (99).

Chapter Four closes the first half of the book by looking at the way in which the Karmapa lineage developed alongside the physical and religious geography of Tibet. It looks at how religious individuals infuse physical spaces with spiritual significance and how, in turn, these spaces are used to solidify the religious significance of individuals. It looks particularly at this feedback-loop phenomenon in the works of Rangjung Dorjé whose praise of particular locales “deconstructs [this] praise cycle as it constructs it” (124).

These initial four chapters seem to be slowly building towards the second half of the book where Gamble’s intimacy with Rangjung Dorjé and his literary works really shines through. The latter four chapters skillfully navigate both the inner and outer life of the Karmapa to give a fully realized account of his journey from the moment of his predecessor’s death to his own. To do so, it follows tradition and is divided into “four sections [that] align with the traditional chapters of a Tibetan biography: birth, childhood and education, retreat and teaching career, and death” (15). While the first half of the book presents readers with the necessary theory to understand the emergence of the Karmapa line-

age, the second half gives them a chance to encounter, in great detail, the man who is credited with reshaping the way in which Tibetan Buddhists understood the rebirth of highly realized practitioners. Gamble surveys Rangjung Dorjé's autobiographies, Tibetan biographies, and relevant contemporary academic literature to provide a full presentation of the Third Karmapa's life. Further, the way in which these chapters weave together legal documents, political letters, (auto)biographical narratives, and songs of realization strikes a good balance between historical accuracy and the wisdom that continues to bring the Third Karmapa such renown to this day. In doing so, she gives her text broad appeal to scholars and practitioners alike.

Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism serves as a clear introduction to the history and study of the tulku system by identifying the important cultural factors that informed its inception, and by giving them context in the life story of Rangjung Dorjé. As such, it is recommended for graduate students and scholars of Buddhism, Tibetan culture, and religious history. Kagyupa practitioners who draw their lineage back to Rangjung Dorjé and who follow the current Karmapa(s) will also find this book useful for situating themselves in this tradition and for making sense of how it came to be. Overall, it is a lucid account of the life of the Third Karmapa, a good analysis of the various aspects that informed his life, and a great investigation into the origins of the tulku system in Tibet.