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# Book Review of The Life of Jamgon Kongtül The Great

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ALEXANDER GARDNER. *Life of Jamgon Kongtrül The Great*. Boulder, Colorado: Snow Lion, 2019. XIII, 506 pp. CAN \$50.00 (hc). ISBN 978-1-611804217-8

Reading the life narrative of a great master is often seen as a source of inspiration and motivation for Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. *The Life of Jamgon Kongtrül The Great* is the first full-length modern historical biography of Jamgön Kongtrül written in English by Alexander Gardner, the director and chief editor of the online biographical encyclopedia *Treasury of Lives*. Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé (1813–1899), a lama initiated in both the Nyingma and Sakya lineages, is known for having collected, edited, wrote, and organized (304) five large collections of Tibetan Buddhist literature known as the “Five Treasuries”; the collections include the Treasury of Kagyü Tantra, the Treasury of Knowledge, the Treasury of Revelations, the Treasury of Instructions and his Collected Works, an endeavour that was achieved over five decades (271). These literature collections, comprised of treasure or *terma*, “refers to all scripture that is identified as having been revealed inside of Tibet” (32). Gardner explains, “According to legend, Padmasambhava concealed scores of teachings across the Tibetan landscape and placed keys to their recovery in the minds of his disciples” (31). Treasure literature was taught by Padmasambhava and were disclosed by “charismatic men and women,” who were “vessels for the word of the Buddha, not authors setting forth their own ideas” (32). Hence, treasure literature was considered “authentic Indian scriptures” (31). In *The Life of Jamgon Kongtrül The Great*, Gardner highlights Kongtrül’s journey of traversing Tibet’s cliffs and mountainsides to unveil the treasures, and he details his primary collaborations with his lifelong lama friend Khyentse Wangpo and Chokgyur Lingpa, a treasure revealer ordained in the Nyingma lineage, before later revealing his treasure teachings.

In this 506-page work, Gardner details a 351-page chronological narration of Kongtrül's biography, recording a near-exhaustive account of his life's events from his birth to death. Gardner draws from Kongtrül's autobiography, recordings from his diary, the biographical literature of his lama colleagues and "self-reflective information" found in the "Five Treasuries" (xi). This book would be of interest to graduate students or specialists researching the process of collecting and editing 19<sup>th</sup> century treasure or *terma* literature, Tibetan Buddhist hagiographical or autobiographical works, especially on Kongtrül and his collaborators, Khyentse Wangpo and Chokgyur Lingpa, and the early backdrop of the Rimé movement. This term literally means "without bias" (349). Rimé is attributed to an ecumenical approach of accepting all parts of the Buddha's teaching as valid towards liberation, as opposed to a sectarian approach that excludes or rejects parts of the Buddha's teachings (351). However, the attribution of Kongtrül to the Rimé movement was a later assertion by figures such as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Nyingma and Sakya teacher Chogyam Trungpa, as Kongtrül did not intend to initiate reformation (349).

Gardner's work is divided into the three sections entitled "Part One: Training" (eleven chapters), "Part Two: Collaborations" (fourteen chapters), and "Part Three: Deaths" (two chapters), which correspond to the topics of traditional Tibetan hagiography (*rnam thar*) including details about an individual's birth, childhood, education, retreat, teaching career, and death. Supplemented by passages from Kongtrül's diary and autobiography, *The Life of Jamgom Kongtrül The Great* also includes an itinerary of Kongtrül's travels, a recording of his initiations as well as empowerments that he bestowed on others, a documentation of his spiritual practices and dharma ceremonies conducted for sponsors, monasteries, royal families and government institutions, and a detailed recounting of prophetic dreams and his interpretations of their meaning. These particulars are skillfully woven within the context of the Tibetan socio-political milieu at each juncture of Kongtrül's life story, such as the effects of the Nyarong

War on the dharma transmission activities of monasteries in Chapter 21, along with an encyclopedic-like summary of Vajrayana practices such as *sādhana* or ritual manuals (26), the levels of empowerments or *abhiśeka* (26) and guru devotion (35), for example. A non-exhaustive summary of the three parts will be outlined.

In “Part One: Training,” Gardner discusses the first thirty years of Kongtrül’s life, beginning with an extensive historical account of the political setting of the Derge Kingdom in Kham, the region of Kongtrül’s birthplace in Eastern Tibet. He begins “Part One” by outlining the complex relationships between established royal families and new rulers due to military campaigns from neighbouring kingdoms (4). Although there were instances whereby non-Geluk institutions were forced to convert (4), Gardner describes the political climate as follows:

There was undoubtedly competition and tension between the different traditions. Still, a balance of power was maintained, allowing Sakya, Nyingma, and Kagyü institutions to flourish side by side, as lamas would regularly meet to teach and learn from each other (6).

By outlining the political backdrop of Kham in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Gardner alludes to the later demand of Kongtrül’s services in the form of dharma activities by royal families and government sponsors and the influences that might have inspired Kongtrül’s ecumenical approach toward the Buddha’s teachings in his later life. Gardner then discusses Kongtrül’s birthplace and his family background, delving into the piety of his mother, Tashi Tso, her faithful chanting of the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara, *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*, and the auspicious dreams she had during her pregnancy, which involved a vulture roosting in her home’s shrine (9). Kongtrül grew up with two fathers in his life, his biological father, Khyungpo Lama Yungdrung Tendzin, who was a lama in the Bön tradition described as “a kind and gentle man” (10), and his stepfather, Sonam Pel,

who “took charge of Kongtrül’s education” (13). His stepfather taught him the Tibetan alphabet, which influenced him to adopt an interest in scriptures at ten (13). Kongtrül’s propensity for learning, along with his experience of a vision of a flying lama, who handed objects to him when he was three years old (14), and his dreams of Padmasambhava at the age of fifteen, contributed in part to his later ordination in the Nyingma lineage and the adoption of the full monastic vows at the age of twenty at the Zhechen Monastery (34). On the significance of dreams, Gardner describes, “From an early age Kongtrül put great stock in the interpretation of his dreams” (16); Kongtrül believed in the prophetic nature of dreams and made sure to record them in great detail, including “the future events they predicted” (16). Hence, a significant portion of Gardner’s work is devoted to the retelling of Kongtrül’s dreams.

Following his entry into full ordination with the Mūlasarvāstivādin vows (34), Kongtrül entered a period of training. For instance, he received “a reading transmissions of 103 volumes of the Kangyur,” the first section of the Tibetan canon, by Zhechen Wontrul, the monk who ordained him (35). A later event that caused significant inner turmoil for Kongtrül was his forced transfer to a Kagyü monastery called Pelpung and his second ordination into the Kagyü lineage, due to his sponsor’s institutional interests (45). Gardner imparts Kongtrül’s misgivings about the event,

At Pelpung he experienced no sense of transformation, no joy at being joined to a community. His antipathy to the ceremony exemplifies a lifelong ambivalence toward his sectarian identity. His Nyingma ordination was deeply felt; he was numb to his Kagyü ordination (46).

Gardner attributes the second ordination in the Kagyü order to Kongtrül’s later “ecumenicalism that seems as much born out of personal frustration as from a wildly curious intellect” (46).

Next, Kongtrül entered a period of retreat at Pelpung in his early twenties. During his retreat, he continued his training, and he received initiations in “the four preliminary practices of the Mahāmudrā tradition,” which included “refuge, Vajrasattva, mandala offerings, and guru yoga” (62) by which Kongtrül built a foundation in his spiritual practice before progressing onto the advanced practices. He also received initiation into the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*, a wrathful form of the Buddha Heruka (62). Kongtrül recalls tension from the monks at Pelpung who questioned his previous Nyingma loyalties and who “actively insulted the education he had received at Zhechen” (64).

Despite the afflictions posed by his peers, Kongtrül completed his Kagyü education (67), serving as a grammar teacher for the Fourteenth Karmapa (1798–1868), who was recognized among a line of high-ranking incarnated lamas from the Kagyü tradition (69). As the Karmapa’s teacher, he traveled to various institutions, including the Namgyeltse Zurmang Monastery, Tsengye Temple, and Nangchen Gar Monastery, to name a few (70). Kongtrül not only partook in dharma festivities, including the Black Hat Ceremony, but he also gave his first public teachings (73). His training continued with receiving the bodhisattva ordination which are “the second of three sets of vows an ordained Tibetan practitioner will take in his or her lifetime after the prātimokṣa monastic ordination” (77). In his late twenties, Kongtrül progressed from the preliminary practices to the creation stage practices, which included prayers to the three forms of Padmasambhava (his peaceful and wrathful forms, and the lion-faced ḍākinī named Simhamukhā) (78-79). His advancement in his spiritual journey was also further validated by positive dreams in which he transformed into Dorje Drolo and Hayagrīva to expel demons (79). Kongtrül also performed long life practices and experienced vivid dreams of dying whereby he realized the stages of bardo, which are the intermediate stages of rebirth (80). During Kongtrül’s training, he also published works such as the *Integration of Means and Wisdom*, and a set of Dorje Drolo liturgies (85),

which provided him with invaluable experience for his later involvement in large publication projects.

Kongtrül's life took a turning point when he met the lama Khyentse Wangpo who became his "closest collaborator and lifelong dear friend" for almost sixty years (87). Gardner describes their friendship, "They nurtured a real and lasting affection for each other that was born the moment they met" (87). Khyentse Wangpo was also "qualified to evaluate and authenticate other people's revelations" due to his identity as a reincarnation of the eight-century Tibetan king Trisong Detsen, who was a treasure holder of Padmasambhava's teachings (87). Gardner delves into their joint efforts in "Part Two: Collaborations." Before ending "Part One," Gardner explains that the title "Jamgon" that Kongtrül was later associated with, was an epithet connected to Mañjuśrī bodhisattva "as a mark of respect for his intellectual accomplishments" (94), which sets the theme for the following section.

Gardner begins "Part Two: Collaborations" by documenting Kongtrül's phase of administrative work, which involved expeditions to various monasteries in the Gyarong region (119). For instance, he was tasked with the investigation of legal complaints against the Shuba monastery in Sokmo regarding the ownership of property between the monastery's leader and the regional minister, highlighting the power struggles between religious and political entities (122). Though Kongtrül was unsuccessful in winning the legal case on behalf of the monastery, his reputation increased at the age of thirty-five when he became "a lama in demand" (129) after pacifying a "rogue" lama named Kuntrul (124). For reasons unknown, Kuntrul failed to receive a title of recognition from the Pelpung Monastery, of which Kongtrül was a representative of (124). Kuntrul sought revenge by planning an attack against delegates of the Pelpung Monastery but Kongtrül helped the delegates to get to safety and secured the support of a large monastic group that forced Kuntrul to



depart (126). As a result of his administrative work, Kongtrül “composed new monastic regulations for the monastery” in his work *Opening the Eye of Discrimination*, and he was sought after by patrons to conduct meditation retreats, invited by high-ranking lamas to oversee building projects for new monasteries (129), and hired by the Derge government to preside over dharma ceremonies (135). For example, his sponsorships involved an invitation by Lhundrubteng, a Derge monastery, “to dispel the evil influenced on the community by earth spirits, to ensure good fortune for the newborn, and to give blessings in the form of empowerments to the royal family” (136). Though Kongtrül was committed to his service work for the government, patrons, and high-ranking lamas, he “resented the responsibilities” which took needed time away from the progress of his meditative practices (130).

The next section of “Part Two: Collaborations” focuses on Kongtrül’s major composition projects including the Treasury of Kagyü Tantra, which focused on the teachings of Marpa and comprised “over a hundred separate liturgical texts in the six volumes of the completed work” when Kongtrül was in his early forties (142). Garnder notes the importance of Kongtrül’s contribution, “he would be able to revise the entire corpus of Kagyü tantric literature, establishing new standards for generations” (142). Another major collaboration involved his work with Chokgyur Lingpa, a self-proclaimed treasure revealer (161) and reincarnate of Lhase Muruk Tsenpo, a son of the eighth century Tibetan emperor Trisong Detsen, both of whom were disciples of Padmasambhava (156). Though Kongtrül was originally skeptical of Chokgyur’s claims, he later gained his confidence after a period of observation (161). Along with Kongtrül’s life-long friend Khyentse, Kongtrül collaborated to help the illiterate Chokgyur Lingpa to pen *Wish-Fulfilling Essence Manual of Oral Instructions*, a Tantra dedicated to Amitāyus, Avalokiteśvara, and Padmasambhava (161-162). The collaboration of Kongtrül, Khyentse, and Chokgyur would lead to a

life-long journey of writing, editing and collecting the *terma* literature of the “Five Treasuries” up to their deaths.

The process of discovering and revealing treasure teachings involved climbing cliffs, scouting caves, and looking for clues in prophetic dreams or inspiring signs from meditation (171). For example, signs included Kongtrül’s dream about “a mountain shaped like Yeshe Tsogyel-riding on a peacock,” the consort of Padmasambhava (171). Gardner describes the discovery of sacred abodes as “places where deities or saints performed specific activities or which embody objects and relics of the saints” (171). Such sacred places served “as a conduit between the faithful and the deity or saint’s ongoing presence” but they were waiting “to be opened” by treasure revealers (171). The abodes may include “a cave, a grove of trees, a lake, an oddly-shaped rock, and so forth” (178) and once these sites became authenticated by treasure revealers, they became places of pilgrimage for devotees who could receive blessings from the sites (178). “Part Two” documents the series of caves and holy sites discovered by the trio of collaborators, Kongtrül, Khyentse, and Chokgyur, which include sacred abodes near the Terlung and Dzingkhok valleys (171), a secret Padmasambhava cave at a peak in Sengpu (181), and a large Padmasambhava cave complex in Drak Yongdzong (186), to name a few.

The most significant discovery was the location of Kongtrül’s hermitage known as Tsādra Rinchen Drak which means “The Jeweled Cliff Similar to Tsāri” in 1857 (179); it was deemed as a powerful site connected to the cultivation of wisdom (178). Tsādra would become the central location of Kongtrül’s multiple retreats. While he was there, Kongtrul established a three-year and three-fortnight retreat training program, a time frame based on the Kālacakra Tantra, which later became a standard model amongst Kagyü and Nyingma institutions “and was replicated in European and North American contexts in the late twentieth century” (212). A unique characteristic of the program was that retreatants “would

neither leave the retreat enclosure nor lay eyes on anyone not also participating in the retreat” (211-212). Retreatants also practiced for more than twenty hours a day, only taking one to two days off a year (218). According to Kongtrül, participants could attain enlightenment during the retreat by transforming “all karmic wind into pristine awareness wind,” a reference to the breath work involved in spiritual practice (212).

Gardner then sheds light on the contribution of Kongtrül’s most substantial work, the *Treasury of Knowledge*, at the age of forty-seven (210). Known as Kongtrül’s “single best literary articulation,” the three-volume *Treasury of Knowledge* provides a survey of Buddhist history and doctrine that is “comprised of a root verse and autocommentary” format (221). In Gardner’s investigation of Kongtrül’s composition method, he reveals a process of doxography by which the Buddha’s teachings were organized in a progressive path from the initial teachings to the advanced, ending with the Dzogchen *atiyoga* teaching of the Nyingma lineage (223). Given the Indian scriptures and doctrines that were entering Tibet, “nothing Indian was rejected” and Kongtrül placed them in the framework of the three turnings of the wheel (224), and he organized them into a transcendent pattern leading to the Vajrayāna completion stage practices (223). More specifically, he “promoted ‘other-emptiness’ as the highest—that is, definitive—Madhyamaka view” (345). Gardner continues, “He advocated Dzogchen as the highest practice, even over the Mahāmudrā of his own Kagyü tradition” (345). Kongtrül’s doxographic approach constitutes his ecumenism which does not reject any teachings but instead, recognizes their place within a graduated practice path.

Towards the end of “Part Two: Collaborations,” Gardner discusses the invasion of the region of Nyarong in 1862, a river valley within the region of Kham, by the chieftain Nyake Gonpo Namgyel, culminating in the three-year Nyarong War (229). Gonpo Namgyel belonged to “a family that nursed several generations worth of grudges against their neighbors”

(220) who, due to “the desire for power and wealth,” sought personal “retribution for past insults” (230). When the war reached the Kingdom of Derge in Kham where Kongtrül’s colleagues, monasteries, and sponsors resided, his services were no longer needed by the kingdom who did not have “the financial means to support his rituals” (230), and he was able to return to his hermitage Tsādra in Pelpung (235) where he was safe from danger until the war began to subside (238).

Following the Nyrarong War, Kongtrül returned full force to his dharma work, and resumed his composition and ceremony activities, which comprises the remaining discussion of “Part Two.” He became a tutor to the Tenth Situ, Kunzang Chogyal, who belonged to a lineage of incarnate Kagyü masters held to be emanations of Maitreya bodhisattva (242). Despite serving as an educator to the Tenth Situ, his own education continued with the studying of medical collections such as “One Hundred Instructions of Darmo, the medical teachings of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s personal physician, Darmo Menrampa Lobzang Chodrak” (243). His interest in medical texts was perhaps linked to his own health ailments which included fainting, pain that Gardner suggests was linked to his lymphatic system, a “cold bile” condition that Gardner attributes to jaundice (244), and an eye disorder that he had been battling in his early twenties (84). In spite of his illnesses, Kongtrül continued to conduct ritual festivities at the request of patrons including a “hero and heroine festival” (245) and he maintained a full schedule of transmitting teachings such as the Lightning Garland of Protective Deities, a practice involving peaceful and wrathful deities, and the Integration of Means and Wisdom, a practice that procures long life (247). Having assisted his collaborators Khyentse and Chokgyur in “decoding treasures – translating their textual inspiration into textual form” for decades, there was a turning point in Kongtrül’s composition work after they requested that he become a treasure revealer himself, a role that he initially hesitated to step into (252). A few years later in 1870 or 1871, he recorded his first treasure teaching titled “United

Intent of the Three Roots” that he discovered at Lhamdo Burmo, a cliff at his hermitage in Tsādra (276), and he began to “produce revelations under his own name” (277), which he would do thirteen times over a thirty year span (278). The locations of the treasures were shown to him in dreams (280), which included the discovery of objects such as “the robes of saints, medicinal substances, or statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas” in addition to scriptures (278).

“Part Two” concludes with Kongtrül’s expulsion from the Pelpung Monastery, an exile that lasted for 11 years (296), on allegations that he violated his monastic vow of celibacy with a woman named Tsering Chodron (295). According to Gardner, “Kongtrül was enraged and deeply wounded” by the accusations (296); previously, he had traveled back and forth between his hermitage and the Pelpung Monastery to give teachings as the leading lama, but the latter activities came to a halt and Kongtrül retreated to Tsādra (296). Despite his senior age during his exile, his treasure work resumed and he climbed snow-capped mountain peaks, such as Pema Lhatse, in his search of Padmasambhava’s treasure caves (308). He “visited dozens of sacred sites, empowering the landscape with rituals and treasure extractions” (297), while keeping the company of his lama friend Khyentse Wangpo (299). His activities during his exile attested to his life-long devotion and diligence in his dharma duties.

“Part Three: Deaths” is comprised of two chapters and it is the shortest section of the work. Kongtrül died in 1899 at the age of eighty-six after suffering a decline in health in the last year, which included high blood pressure, edema in his legs, and a skin rash (342). Gardner shares the details of the funerary rituals performed based on his disciples’ accounts such as those of Tashi Chopel (341); his body was “undisturbed by three days, wrapped in his robes, [and] a meditation hat crowning his head” (342-343) while his disciples chanted funerary prayers alongside him (343). He was “propped up in a seated position with a five-point crown

symbolizing the five buddha families of Yoga Tantra on his head and a vajra and bell in his hands” (343). His final seated position was, in part, an ode to his lifelong work on the dharma throne.

Gardner ends “Part Three” with a summary of the legacy that Kongtrül left behind. He writes, “The definitions of treasure revelation and presentations of teaching traditions that Kongtrül and Khyentse formulated became something akin to the orthodox positions on the topics” (345). Gardner continues,

The transmission of the Treasury of Revelations continues to be a major event in Kagyu, Nyingma, and Sakya communities. In his Treasury of Knowledge Kongtrül defined religious terminology for the last century of Tibetan Buddhists. He explained the origins, significance, and benefits of the entire corpus of Buddhist teachings and practices. He provided the standard manuals for tantric initiations and other rituals for the Kagyu tradition. And he determined which instructional texts were canonical for all eight teaching traditions of Tibetan Buddhism in his Treasury of Instructions (346).

Following a recap of Kongtrül’s contribution, Gardner highlights his ecumenical approach. He clarifies, “Kongtrül’s ecumenicalism was in no way a call for syncretism or a rejection of institutional structures of religion” but instead a turning away from “negative sectarianism” (351). Gardner counters previous interpretations by the contemporary translator of Kongtrül’s works, Gene Smith, that he initiated religious reform (348); instead, Kongtrül was a highly conservative Buddhist dedicated to his lineages, while preserving the teachings of other traditions within a well-established institutional system and within prevailing doctrinal boundaries. His counter-assertion continued with the contemporary lama Chogyam Trungpa’s association of Kongtrül as the founder of the Rimé school (349). Kongtrül never intended to start a new religious tradition or revolutionize

an existing one. He considered his compositions and activities as nothing more than a continuation of the existing traditions.

The impact of the individual deaths of figures close to Kongtrül, including Wongen, his lama teacher at Pelpung Monastery, Tashi Tso, his mother, and his collaborators, Chokgyur Lingpa and Khyentse Wangpo<sup>1</sup> is also discussed throughout the three parts of the work; though their deaths do not fall within the themes of “training” and “collaborations,” of which the parts are titled, they occurred within a chronological timeline and were thus included within the discourse of the three parts. Regarding the death of his mother, for example, Kongtrül was “deeply affected” and out of “heartfelt filial piety he declared that he sold half of his possessions to sponsor recitations and other meritorious acts to dedicate to her future births” (253). His grief was comforted when he received “news of her positive rebirth in an astonishing dream” (254). The last third of the work is comprised of approximately one hundred and fifty-some pages; it provides a timeline of significant events in Kongtrül’s life, maps of the Tibetan Plateau, Northern Kham, Derge, and Central Tibet, a full list of Tibetan orthographic equivalents with reference to the phonetic spelling and Wylie transliteration parallels, a notes section, and an index.

*The Life of Jamgom Kongtrül The Great* goes beyond a mere biography of Kongtrül that transcribes an extensive record of his literary oeuvre, the history and politics of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Kham and Eastern Tibet, and his compilation process of treasure literature. One of the strengths of Garner’s work is his extensive knowledge of the Vajrayāna tradition and practices. Gardner does not assume specialist knowledge from the reader such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Khyentse passed away in 1892 after being ill for years (334). After his death, Kongtrül performed various rituals both privately and publicly to mourn Khyentse’s death (334). He also repurposed a stupa at the Pelpung Monastery that he had been building previously as a memorial for Khyentse (335), in addition to writing a biography of him entitled *Fabulous Grove of Uḍumbara Flowers: The Abbreviated Life Story of the Noble and Omniscient Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo Kunga Tenpai Gyeltsen* (337).

comprehension of Buddhist terms; instead, he devotes attention to explaining concepts such as a bodhisattva (12), the subtle body system (26), and the four stages of empowerment or *abhiśeka* which include, for example, the rituals involved in the vase empowerment and the secret empowerment (26). To cite other examples, Gardner also gives an extensive and clear explanation of the Dzogchen teaching of *togel* or “supreme vision” and *trekchod* or “breaking through solidity” (72). Regarding the latter, Gardner explains, “Because saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are two opposite ways for perceiving the same phenomenon—ordinary beings’ perceptions are flawed, but a buddha’s is pure— every moment is an opportunity for enlightenment by simply seeing things as they truly are” (71). Specialists would also appreciate Gardner’s review of Buddhist terms, such as the previous example, which provides clarity of *his* use of the concepts; since discipline experts may not share the same definitions, his summaries contribute to a transparent reading.

Given that Gardner’s book would be accessible to a non-specialist who is interested in the biography of Jamgom Kongtrül, due to his clear teachings on Buddhist concepts, the extensive transcription and recording of the minutiae details of Kongtrül’s activities are overwhelming at times; consequently, *The Life of Jamgom Kongtrül The Great* would be better suited for graduate students or discipline-specific researchers. For instance, Gardner’s approach of delving into the details of the socio-political history of Tibet in “Part One: Training” would be less intrusive on the chronological storytelling of Kongtrül’s training if such particulars were placed in the notes section. At other times, however, Gardner’s imparting of information is well placed within the narrative context. For example, his survey of the daily life of monastics and the exchange of money or goods between the public and the lamas as it pertains to lodging, communal meals and sponsorship, helps to frame his next discussion of Kongtrül’s training at the Pelpung Monastery (39). Once the reader adjusts to Gardner’s chronological approach of giving a historical discussion and



an introduction to Vajrayana teachings, followed by the narrative of Kongtrül's life, a pattern that is repeated throughout the work, Gardner's devotion to a thorough rendering of Kongtrül's life becomes apparent. *The Life of Jamgom Kongtrül The Great* is an homage to the lifelong diligence and dedication to his dharma practice, propagation and composition work.

#### Notes on the Contributor(s)

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