

Review

Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa, *Great Treatise on the Stages of Mantra: Chapters XI–XII* (The Creation Stage). Annotated translation by Thomas Freeman Yarnall. New York: American Institute for Buddhist Studies/Columbia University Press, 2013. xxiii + 381 pp. £38.50. ISBN 978-1-935011-01-9 (hardback).

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This edition comprises an annotated translation of the ‘Creation Stage Practices’ of ‘Unexcelled Yoga Tantra’ as expounded in chapters 11 and 12 in Tsongkhapa Losang Dragpa’s (1357–1419 CE) highly influential *Vajrayāna Treatise on the Stages of Mantra*, or *Sngags rim chen mo*. It is the first of two volumes, with a forthcoming publication to feature an annotated translation of the ‘Completion Stage Practices’ as presented in chapters 13 and 14 of the original treatise. A parallel, related, publication is to complete the set with the critically edited Tibetan source text, replete with all traceable textual parallels and quotes from Tibetan (and Sanskrit) canonical sources.

Little needs to be said about the scope and significance of the *Great Treatise on the Stages of Mantra*, or *Sngags rim chen mo*—the monumental treatise on all major aspects of *Vajrayāna* practice rivalled in scope and depth, perhaps, only by Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye’s (1833–1899 CE) intricate treatment of the subject. The treatise comprises ‘a highly original analysis and critique of [many a century of] competing interpretations of the nature of Tantra’ (p. 3). This work was soon established as one of the main pillars of *Gelug* orthodoxy in all matters pertaining to *Vajrayāna* practice and formed the backbone of the curriculum at the tantric colleges.

The translation strategy chosen for this work generally favours target-language intelligibility over literal rendering of the source-language. Generally, this allows for smooth reading without any significant loss in analytical and lexical accuracy.

There are, however, some instances where adherence to established terminological conventions might have proven more advantageous. To cite an example, it can be argued that the standard phrase ‘skilful means’ more closely and fully conveys the semantics of *upāya* (Skt.) / *thabs* (Tib.) than the term ‘art aspect’ (p. 29), the term prevalently employed in the edition. A slightly more ‘contoured’ choice of translation terminology might have proven helpful in avoiding misinterpretation by non-specialist readers who have not yet had the opportunity to appropriate the orthodox philosophical edifice underlying

the exoteric and tantric aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. The contention that ‘a buddha’s truth body’ corresponds ‘roughly to a buddha’s mind of intuition’ (p. 30) is not problematic for the scholastic community to contextualize, yet it could be seen as a concession to the non-specialist’s pre-conceived notions that comes at the cost of semantic and taxonomic particularities of the source system. The contention that ‘the accumulation of merit’ is analogous to the ‘practice of art’ (p. 30) presents a similar predicament, although the glossary somewhat alleviates this problem by providing the standard rendition in parenthesis. Given the significance of these concepts, it might have been helpful to lessen the potential for misinterpretation by opting for a more literal definition and further analytical explanation to be provided in a short paragraph or accompanying endnote.

Considering the renown of the original treatise it is very likely that many a non-specialist will instinctively relate to this edition as a singular reference or stand-alone introduction to the topic, which adds further cogency to the cause of extensive contextualization in the commentarial section. Yarnall, clearly understanding this point, has provided acute, abundant and purposeful references for the ‘translation proper’. Had he likewise opted to clarify with similar cogency, the rationale behind the preference of a novel definition over an established term upon its introduction in the first section—which Yarnall aptly does on p. 65, for example—this might have resulted in a more voluminous and slightly less fluid opening section, but it would very likely have helped facilitate the reader’s concept formation process.

The non-standard term ‘intuition hero’—a novel rendition of *ye shes sems dpa’*—can theoretically be understood by the reader through indirect derivation from related concepts as explained in the commentary. Still, whilst the term is first introduced at an early point (p. 71), the reasons for deviating from established modes of rendition is fully and adequately explained only comparatively late (fn. 458 on p. 258), albeit in a clear and convincing manner.

A very limited number of terms diverge from established conventions in a way which does not allow for ready intelligibility, even if an informed attempt at indirect derivation is made. Yarnall’s translation of ‘*sahaja*’ (Skt.) / ‘*lhan cig skyes pa*’ (Tib.) (p. 54, *Tashi Lhunpo edn.* 360b) as ‘orgasmic’ bliss is a case in point. Traditionally rendered as ‘co-emergent’ or ‘spontaneously born’ great bliss, it is as such attested to in autochthonous sources, oral traditions, and Western commentarial literature. The author’s rendition of the term is not readily traceable in the standard Sanskrit and Tibetan dictionaries. Also, the great majority of instances wherein ‘*lhan cig skyes pa*’ features in the *Bka’ gyur* are embedded in contexts which suggest that the ‘classical’ rendition of the term might be the one with greater applicability. Hence if Yarnall’s rendition is indeed to be followed at all, it definitely merits an elaborate, clarifying reference, more so with the rampant availability of unreliable sources in non-specialist literature.

The author consistently provides a rich, lucid and very practical nexus of reference points which help tremendously in navigating the complex structure of the source text: topical and structural outlines supplied by the author, elaborate bibliographical citation of canonical sources constructively complement listings of parallels in canonical sources and charts that clarify, amongst other things, 'where a given Tengyur Tantric commentarial text fits into the overall Buddhist Tantric system' (p. xxiii). Relying on these additional materials, scholars will be able to trace individual sections and subsections cited from Tantras and their concomitant commentaries with minimal effort. The introduction presents with enjoyable fluency and erudition all major historical facts and philosophical factors conducive to a balanced and informed understanding of the text, its purpose, its author, and the time in which it was composed.

This edition presents for the first time in the English language material of undeniable historical, philosophical and religious significance and does so in a very accessible, systematic, and structured manner. Consequently, specialists, religious practitioners and the educated public alike can derive considerable benefit from this wonderful edition, although a full appreciation of the different academic 'lenses' and interpretative schools of thought might necessitate a comparative approach that takes related works into account, for example Cozort's *Highest Yoga Tantra* (1986) and other publications (e.g. as listed by Yarnall under fn. 7, p. 7). Without doubt, the critically edited Tibetan source text, announced as forthcoming publication, will provide a solid basis for further text-critical and comparative investigations.