Book Reviews


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The omnipresence of Padmasambhava as an inspirational figure in Tibetan Buddhism has been long recognized in Western scholarship. Georgi’s Alphabetum Tibetanum (Rome 1762) already included a brief discussion and illustration of him (242 and plate IV). Waddell, in The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism, treats him as “the founder of Lamaism” and considers himself to have been the first to have done so (1895 [second edition 1934]). Tibetan literary versions of the legends devoted to Padmasambhava became well-known during the mid-twentieth century through the work of Charles-Gustave Toussaint (1933) and of Kazi Dawa Samdup and W. Y. Evans-Wentz (1954), the first of which offered a pioneering (if often flawed) French translation of the Padma bka’ thang of O rgyan gling pa (1323-c. 1360) and the second an English summary of the similar work revealed by Sangs rgyas gling pa (1341-1396). Not until recent decades, however, have Tibetanists given sustained attention to the historical background of the Padmasambhava traditions and to detailing the course of their development. About Padmasambhava unites ten recent contributions to research in this area, the fruit of two workshops held in London (2013) and New York (2018) respectively.

Following an introductory essay by co-editor Geoffrey Samuel that summarizes the contents of the volume, the main body of the book is divided into three parts, the first of which concerns “Padmasambhava in Early Manuscripts,” that is, the late first millennium Tibetan documents discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century in Dunhuang. The first chapters are by two of the leading specialists on these archaic Tibetan sources who have already explored the relevant manuscripts at length in their previous publications. In “The Early Development of the Padmasambhava Legend in Tibet: A Second Look at the Evidence from Dunhuang,” Jacob P. Dalton reviews all four of the Dunhuang texts that mention Padmasambhava (ITJ321 and 644 in the British Library collection and PT44 and 307 at the Bibliothèque nationale de France), reviewing the state of research and adding his present reflections about them. As has been evident for some time, and as Dalton develops in further detail here, the main lineaments of the elaborated legends that took form in later centuries can already be discerned in these works, including Padmasambhava’s status as a tantric master (ITJ644), his activities in

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Nepal (PT44), his contributions to tantric exegesis (ITJ321), and his virtuosity as a demon-tamer (PT307).

In the second chapter, “Geographical and Other Borders in the Symbolism of Padmasambhava,” Robert Mayer focuses upon the same group of texts together with some later works. He also considers elements of archaeological and art historical evidence, examining the diverse elements—geographical, iconographic, and legendary—that together contributed to the formation of the composite mythic figure of Padmasambhava, a tantric siddha from Uḍḍiyāna to Tibet’s northwest. Despite a possibly marginal role in Tibet’s eighth-century adoption of Buddhism, and indeed perhaps in virtue of the dynamics of marginality and his associations “with borders and the crossing of boundaries” (90), Mayer argues that Padmasambhava “creatively navigated the boundaries between Buddhist tantrism and indigenous Tibetan religion.” I found this chapter to be particularly stimulating in view of the diversity of the data brought into play here. One small point that bears correction is Mayer’s translation of the designation of a group of divinities tamed by Padmasambhava, the brtan ma bcu gnyis, as the “Twelve Established Goddesses” (77). Brtan ma in fact translates the name of the Goddess of the Earth, Sthāvarā, who appeared when the Buddha, approaching enlightenment, called on her to bear witness to his past deeds. The Tibetan group, therefore, would be better designated as the Twelve Earth Goddesses.

Chapter 3, “The Lotus-Born in Nepal: A Dunhuang Narrative and the Later Biographical Tradition” by Lewis Doney, examines the parallels between the Dunhuang version of the legend of Padmasambhava’s introduction of the tantras of the wrathful divinity Vajrakīla to Nepal1 and the account given in an influential twelfth century life story of Padmasambhava. The text in question, the Zangs gling ma, revealed as “treasure” by Myang ral Nyi ma ’od zer (1124-1192), has been at the centre of Doney’s on-going research. His demonstration of the affinities linking these sources appears to reinforce earlier observations of Cathy Cantwell concerning the continuity between certain Dunhuang ritual texts and aspects of the ritual corpus revealed by Myang ral, a point to which we shall return below.

The second part of the volume considers “Padmasambhava in the gTer-ma Tradition.” The Precious Guru may be considered the patron saint of much of the Tibetan revelatory tradition, so that many of the hundreds of “treasures” (gter-ma) that have appeared over the centuries concern him directly or are attributed to him as their source. Referring now only to the texts (for the “treasures” may also be in the form of sculptures, ritual implements, sacramental substances, and other objects), gter-ma include copious ritual works and a smaller but still substantial body of narrative texts. Chapter 4, by Cathy Cantwell, takes up an important dimension of the ritual traditions in treating “The Formative Impact of Guru Chöwang’s (gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, 1212-1270) Secret Embodiment of the Lama (bla ma gsang 'dus) on the Padmasambhava Ritual Traditions.” As she shows here, primarily with reference to an epitome of devotional rituals dedicated to Padmasambhava composed by the renowned Rnying ma pa master Bdud 'joms Rin po che 'Jigs bral ye shes

1. Pelliot tibétain 44 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.
rdo rje (1904-1987), the “Secret Embodiment of the Lama” served as a template for many such ritual works composed over the past eight centuries.

Indeed, the vast elaboration in Tibet of rituals focusing upon the figure of the guru, whether Padmasambhava or other teachers, may be considered one of the hallmarks of Tibetan tantric Buddhism. The production in Indian Buddhism of formal ritual programs focusing upon the figure of the guru appears to have been unusual; in the Tibetan Buddhist translation canons only a handful of examples of such works are preserved, notably two gurusādhana by the mahāsiddhas Tilopā and Naropā respectively. In Tibet, however, rituals for “Worship of the Guru” (gurupūjā, bla ma mchod pa), “Attainment of the Guru” (gurusādhana, bla sgrub), and the devotional “Yoga of the Guru” (guruyoga, bla ma’i rnal ’byor) probably number in the thousands and are practiced, individually or collectively (see also chapter 10), in all lineages and orders by both laypersons and clergy.

In connection with my own emphasis in past work on the prominence of southern Tibet in the early Padmasambhava traditions, a geographical point that finds support in Mayer’s contribution, it may be noted that the two figures who seem most strongly implicated in the twelfth and thirteenth century growth of the Padmasambhava cult—Myang ral Nyi ma ’od zer and Gu ru chos dbang—hailed from these same regions. These prominent teachers are emphasized in the present volume in the chapters by Doney and Cantwell. Together with Cantwell’s earlier observations, mentioned above, concerning links between sources known from Dunhuang and works of Myang ral’s tradition, it seems quite sure that their activities in southern Tibet were fostered by the actual preservation there of documents similar to those we now know from the discoveries at Dunhuang.

Martin Boord’s chapter, “An Introduction to the Stainless Ornament Biography of Guru Padmasambhava revealed as a Dharma Treasure by bSam gtan gling pa,” provides an analysis of the contents of one of the later versions of Padmasambhava’s life, revealed by a famed seventeenth century treasure-finder, Bsam gtan gling pa (b. 1655), a.k.a. Stag sham nus Idan rdo rje. Boord demonstrates how the author of this version attempts to model the story on accounts of the twelve deeds of the Buddha, thereby reinforcing the status claimed for Padmasambhava as the “second buddha.” In the chapter that follows, “Branching from the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the Extensive Life of Ye shes mtsho rgyal,” Jue Liang surveys the representation of Padmasambhava in a not-previously-studied life of the master’s Tibetan consort. These last two contributions, together with Lewis Doney’s chapter on the Zangs gling ma of Myang ral Nyi ma ’od zer, accentuate for the present reviewer a primary need for the future of “Padmasambhava Studies”: the Padmasambhava story may be considered one of Tibet’s great literary epics; its many versions—principally the three expansive versions of Orgyan gling pa, Sangs rgyas gling pa, and Padma gling pa (1450-1521), together with the aligned narratives we find in accounts of Ye shes mtsho rgyal, Lady Mandāravā, and in the Bka’ thang sde lnga—still await careful content analysis and comparison, together with sustained efforts to identify their varied sources. The contributions of Boord and Liang usefully point the way to this larger endeavour.
The third and final part of About Padmasambhava, “Padmasambhava: Other Aspects,” includes four contributions. Lama Jampa Thaye, in chapter 7, “Padmasambhava and His Legacy: Sa skya Perspectives,” offers a brief overview of the place of the Precious Guru and, more broadly, distinctive Rnying ma pa teachings, in the Sa skya pa tradition. The material covered is well-known to specialists, though the article may serve as an accessible introduction for those not familiar with the topic. It seems unfortunate, however, that the opportunity was not taken to delve somewhat more deeply into prominent engagements with Padmasambhava and teachings stemming from him on the part of notable Sa skya pa masters, particularly those who became renowned as gter ston, “treasure revealers,” such as Bdud gdul rdo rje (1615-1672), considered to have been a predecessor of the Bdud ’joms lineage, and ’Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse’i dbang po (1820-1892), the great Sa skya/Rnying ma Teacher who is regarded as one of the fountainheads of the so-called Ris med, or “Universalist,” movement in nineteenth century Khams.

As patron of the broad range of Tibetan revelatory traditions, Padmasambhava is associated with a wide variety of the ritual, apotropaic, and other practices derived from them. Co-editor Jamyang Oliphant, in “The Significance of Padmasambhava in the bcud len Tradition,” considers one such, the alchemical method of bcud len, “extraction of essences” (Skt. rasaśāyana), relying on plant substances and minerals to sustain life and health. Oliphant offers what is in effect an initial bibliographical survey of this field, with some remarks about the possible origins of the practice, emphasizing properly Tibetan contributions that appear to be accentuated in the traditions ascribed to Padmasambhava.

Chapter 9 by James Gentry, “Historicism, Philology, and State-building in 17th-century Tibet: Observations Apropos of a Text-critical Biography of Padmasambhava,” offers a contextually astute introduction to one of the most prominent attempts on the part of Tibetan authors to produce a rationalized account of Padmasambhava’s life and, in particular, his activities in Tibet: “Dispelling Mental Darkness” (yid kyi mun sel) by the renowned Rnying ma pa polemicist and ritual master Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552-1624). As Gentry states in concluding (247), this work may be seen “as an effort to implicate the widest possible audience into a vision of Tibet’s past, present, and future, one that features an idealized image of the tantric master and his relationship with the state.”

In the Tibetan ritual calendar, the tenth day of each lunar month (tshes bcu) is dedicated to the rites of worship of the guru, and for all Rnying ma pa, and many others as well, this means collective practice dedicated to Padmasambhava. In the closing chapter of About Padmasambhava, anthropologist Nicolas Sihlè’s “The Social Dimension of High Deity Worship: Padmasambhava tsechu Worship in Tibetan Tantrist Ritual Culture,” we are introduced to an example on the ground, the performance of one such ritual among lay tantric adepts in the region of Rebkong, in far northeastern Tibet (now Tongren district in Qinghai) with reference, too, to comparable fieldwork Sihlè conducted among tantrists in northern Nepal. His emphasis upon the social, collective aspect of Tibetan religion, together with Gentry’s on literary efforts “to implicate the widest possible audience,” offers a valuable cor-
rective to some accounts that depict Himalayan Buddhism, and indeed Buddhism more generally, as tending to atomize the individual in his or her pursuit of merit and liberation.

Given the focus of the present volume on literature and, secondarily, ritual, some important aspects of Padmasambhava’s presence in Tibetan culture are not well represented in these pages. The two that most stand out for this reviewer are the tremendous role of the Lotus-Born Guru in the formation of Tibetan sacred geography, including the pilgrimage cycles this entails, and his ubiquitous presence in Tibetan art (though these issues are touched on to some extent in Robert Mayer’s contribution). The first is indeed widely discussed in the many works consecrated to Tibetan sacred space that have appeared in recent years. The second topic was the subject of a volume published three decades ago (Essen and Thingo 1991), but, given all that we have learned of Tibetan art history since its appearance, a renewed effort in this direction would be welcome.

*About Padmasambhava* is an attractively produced volume offering varied new scholarship on its topic. It may be highly recommended to individuals and institutions with a focus on Tibetan cultural history and religion.

### Bibliography


