

# TIBETAN RENAISSANCE: TANTRIC BUDDHISM IN THE REBIRTH OF TIBETAN CULTURE

RONALD M. DAVIDSON

REVIEWED BY CHRIS HASKETT

*Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture*

Ronald M. Davidson

New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. 596 p., w/ bib., index, and illus.

The Buddhism of the Himalayan highlands has been abundantly explored in the past thirty years; the history of Tibet, less so, and still less scholarly attention has been given to studying how religion has influenced Tibetan history. Ronald Davidson's *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* helps fill this gap, taking up a particularly thorny and, not surprisingly, understudied chapter of the history of Tibetan culture, the period from 950-1200.

This volume follows on Davidson's previous offering, an excellent account of the social circumstances and outflows of the rise of tantra in India. Summarizing and advancing this work in Chapter One, Davidson proposes that in the culturally and politically fragmented wake of the dissolution of Harsavardana's empire (607-647 CE), tantric discourses were able to simultaneously access and undermine the power of other religious elements. The *mandala* framework was flexible, expandable, and readily adaptable to feudal political organization (31).

Such was the situation Tibetans encountered in medieval India. As Chapter Two depicts, the domestic Tibetan scene was also shot through with disorder and with competition among new religious and social groupings. The Tibetan King Lang Darma had persecuted Buddhist institutions, most likely to quash competition for resources and bolster revenues (66), and was murdered by a Buddhist monk. The problem of his succession divided the realm and in the absence of an established polity, lawless violence and brigandry ensued. Chapter Three shows that while the Eastern Vinaya monks were able to re-found monastic institutions, monastic Mahayana Buddhism could not provide the "magical authority" or "rituals of dominion" (116) that tantra could. However, while tantra had the requisite power, its authenticity was often in question, and thus translators became vital links between the ancient established Indian Buddhism and the newly emerging Tibetan forms.

While the cultural importance of the *lo tsa ba* is well-documented, beginning in Chapter Four

Davidson provides a closer examination of several important figures such as Marpa, Ngog, Drokmi, and Rinchen Zangpo. His explanation for their prominence is that their proximity and familiarity with Indian sources buttressed claims of authenticity and, subsequently, to authority. In the dangerous and socially disjointed post-imperium atmosphere, the magic and ritual power of tantra was key to control, but with so many actors vying for dominion, the Indic provenance to which translators could attest legitimated their power. As examples, Davidson details the careers of Marpa and Ralo rdo rje grags, and dedicates Chapter Five to the life and work of Drokmi ('brog mi shakya ye shes, ca 990-1074 CE). The report of Drokmi also makes clear how Indian panditas such as Gayadhara took advantage of the Tibetan desire for dharma, often composing new texts to fit Tibetan needs and collecting great quantities of gold. Drokmi is also important as the translator of the supposedly Indic *Root Text of the Margaphala*, a seminal text for the Sakya *lamdre* system and for Tibetan Buddhism which is presented here for the first time. Davidson's exhaustively annotated edition and translation of the *Margaphala* are valuable contributions in their own right.

Chapter 6 treats the difficult phenomenon of Terma (*gter-ma*) or Treasure Texts with careful attention, and shows the connection of Terma to the remaining temple structure of the old imperium. We also see that while the novelty of Terma was grounds for suspicion, it also propelled Tibet to legitimacy as a new source for Buddhist texts. In Chapter 7, Davidson follows the consolidation of power and authority as powerful clans and aristocracy conjoined the Eastern Vinaya network of religious sites, the new Indian translations, and the "spiritual" powers of both old and new tantrists into a fully assimilated Buddhist social system in the eleventh century. By the twelfth century, Tibetan Buddhism had become an independent force to be reckoned with, and while Turkic invaders forced a deluge of Indian monks into U-Tsang, Tibetans were now beginning to articulate and implement Buddhism on their own terms. Institutional development and stabilization of lineages allowed the gains of the past two centuries to become lasting factors in Tibetan culture.

*Tibetan Renaissance* is replete with historical detail, which may form one of its few shortcomings. Scholars will find this richness rewarding, but those less familiar with Tibetan geography, personages, history, and texts may find themselves overwhelmed. Davidson mitigates this somewhat, stylistically, by concluding each chapter with a review of its contents, and his writing is clear, artful, and enjoyable. Moreover, much of what makes this book shine is that we can now see the many factors that make up Tibetan Buddhism in relation to one another—Tantra, Mahayana, Terma, and Vinaya; Kadampa, Kagyu, Nyingma, and Sakya; monks, yogins, translators, and warlords; Dakpa Gyaltzen, Sakya Pandita, the Dalai Lamas, Khubilai Khan, Padampa Sangye, Marpa, Milarepa, Atisa, Domton, and Rinchen Zangpo; and dozens of less well-known elements and personages of Tibetan Buddhism

appear here in an all-star cast and are presented in a sensible, accessible narrative. Davidson brings together a vast range of texts, many for the first time, as well as diverse philosophical doctrines, religious practices, and geographical locales. The attentive reader has much to learn from his work.

But does all this add up to a Tantric Renaissance? Can Davidson claim that it was tantra that led to a "rebirth" of Tibetan society? Davidson entitles one section of *Tibetan Renaissance* "History as the Victory of Great Ideas and Good Organization" and for religio-political systems to succeed, they must have both. We are given here a very complete account of how systems of religious transmission, institutional succession, and intellectual exchange and development emerged and transformed one another. However, Davidson's claim for tantra as a transformer of *culture* is not fully substantiated in *Tibetan Renaissance* because, although we have excellent support for the Great Ideas, the program is very much *der Gipfel sehen deinander*. The all-important valleys—where so many Tibetans live—are out of the picture. The exchange of ideas and texts among elites, rulers, and literati is well-documented; what is lacking is a sense of how tantra allowed for social order and stability, collection of revenues, consolidation of polities, and all the other organizational factors that make up a society. Davidson tells us, for example, that

... the twelfth century was the time when the organization of Tibetan social life offered by the clan structure throughout Central Tibet became a reality for most of the monastic orders and great denominations that prospered during the century (321).

I cannot see, at least from this account, how *institutional* organization of monasteries, teaching lineages, etc., translated into *social* organization. I would propose that the magical wonder and ritual authority of tantra, to which Davidson repeatedly alludes, are most likely what made that possible, but a fully worked-out understanding of the internal dynamics of that process is not to be had here. To be certain, though, the intellectual and institutional developments that Davidson has so masterfully chronicled provided the framework for the ritual programs that integrated Tibetan society, and for his large addition to our understanding of Tibet and its history, we should be grateful.

*Chris Haskett is a PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where his work focuses on the cultural and social history of Buddhism in South Asia. In 2008 he will be a Fulbright-Hays Fellow in India, studying the history of papadesana in Indian Buddhism.*