



**Ruth Gamble.** *The Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje: Master of Mahamudra.* Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2020. 296 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-61180-708-0.

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When one enjoys reading a book, it is usually because one is interested in the subject or it is well written. This groundbreaking account of the life and intellectual legacy of Rangjung Dorje (Rang byung rDo rje, 1284-1339) falls in both categories, provided that one is interested in Tibetan Buddhism and this crucial phase in the history of the Karma Kagyü (Karma bKa' brgyud) tradition of Tibet. Like other volumes within Shambhala Publications' Lives of the Master Series, *The Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje: Master of Mahāmudrā* by Ruth Gamble attempts to strike a balance between the interests of a more scholarly audience and individuals with a general interest in Tibetan Buddhism. Ruth Gamble completed her doctoral studies at the Australian National University with a PhD on the invention of reincarnation lineages and the life of Karmapa Rangjung Dorje. This research, conducted under the supervision of John Powers, Roger Jackson, and David Templeman, culminated in her first book, *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: The Third Karmapa and the Invention of a Tradition* (2018). Hence the author seems well prepared for this current undertaking, covering as it does the Third Karmapa's life and legacy. Like her first, more extensive scholarly treatment of the subject, the present work makes an important contribution to our understanding

of the early formation of the Karma Kagyü tradition and the establishment of the Karmapa reincarnation lineage, but reaches out also to a more general readership.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 ("Biography") draws on Rangjung Dorje's autobiographies and songs to reconstruct the most important phases of his life: from his birth (chapter 1), education (chapter 2), and retreat (chapter 3) to his teaching (chapter 4) and death (chapter 5). Part 2 ("The Writings") offers translations of some of the source material used by the author, such as short liberation stories (chapter 6), songs (chapters 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 17), translations of Indian "birth stories" or *jātakas* (chapters 9, 10), praises (chapter 13), instructions (chapter 15), and paths of aspirations (*smon lam*) (chapter 16).

The first part of the book focuses on the biography of Rangjung Dorje, as presented in his collected writings and further biographies by later masters. In chapter 1, Gamble introduces the reader to narratives concerning Rangjung Dorje's predecessor, his birth, and his general background. Born to a socially disadvantaged family, Rangjung Dorje was in fact recognized at a young age as the reincarnation of the Second Karmapa Karma Pakshi (Karma PakShi, 1203/4-83), a luminous master

and lineage holder of the Karma Kagyü tradition who interacted with some of the world's most influential people of his time. Karma Pakshi had already been regarded as the reincarnation of the First Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mKhyen pa, 1110-93), who had founded Tsurpu (mTshurphu) Monastery, the main seat of the Karma Kagyü tradition in Tibet. It is, however, the recognition of the Third Karmapa that formally established a lineage of reincarnation, that is, the Karmapa reincarnation lineage. This was a turning point that, as Gamble puts it, changed the "Tibetan social, religious, and political history" (p. 45).

Concerning Gamble's apt presentation of the institutionalization of the Karmapa reincarnation lineage, I am tempted to add an observation of my own that I have previously elaborated elsewhere, which may help to contextualize the tradition's background even further.[1] While the Karma Kagyü forefather Gampopa (sGam po pa bSod nams Rin chen, 1079-1153) did not contribute explicitly to the formal establishment of the first Tibetan reincarnation lineage, his particular syncretic approach of Buddhist practice may have facilitated or even initiated its development. By presenting instantaneist instructions as the last method on the gradual path, Gampopa evaded in fact the criticism that a single method would suffice to attain awakening by reconciling two seemingly conflicting approaches. Allowing the use of a single method for attaining awakening in a set-up wherein a student has already undergone extensive training along the gradual path throughout previous lifetimes, this innovation made it in turn necessary to recognize individuals of the highest capacity considered to be suitable recipients of those specific methods. It is therefore unsurprising that the first Tibetan reincarnation lineage evolved in such an environment.

Chapter 2 deals with Rangjung Dorje's early education from the age of four until his late teens before he started to travel throughout central

Tibet as a wandering yogi. During this period, he received countless tantric and non-tantric instructions of his own as well as other traditions, a fact that turned him into an important lineage holder of his time and contributed to the establishment of his identity as a reincarnate Lama. While it became customary for later Karmapas to return to Tsurpu and take it as their seat, Gamble shows that this tradition was far from being established or even generally accepted during Rangjung Dorje's time: "His time at Tsurpu is difficult; he is not welcomed by all its residents and spends a good deal of his youth in a hillside retreat center behind Tsurpu" (p. 48).

Gamble dedicates chapter 3 to Rangjung Dorje's meditative retreats as a mountain hermit, thus following the classical threefold approach of Buddhist education, comprising study, reflection, and meditation. It is in the descriptions of his journeys to different sacred sites that we learn about Rangjung Dorje's interactions with different groups and communities, and how he gained support from the people through the display of miracles.

In chapter 4, Gamble explores what she describes as the "most productive" phase of Rangjung Dorje's life, dedicated by the master to establishing his activity as a teacher in the Tölung Valley first (1314-24) and the Konpo region later (1325-31). It is in this period that he "solidified his—and the Karmapas'—reputation across the Plateau and beyond as a writer of substance and a charismatic presence" (p. 87). Touching upon the thorny topic of emptiness, Gamble diverges from the widespread view of Rangjung Dorje as an advocate of "extrinsic emptiness" (*gzhan stong*) over "intrinsic emptiness" (*rang stong*), arguing instead that the master was engaged into a different debate altogether: "In this debate, he and other members of the broader Kagyü tradition, as well as those members of the Nyingma tradition who practiced and promoted the Great Completion teachings, argued for the primacy of a path based

on close, sometimes unconventional interactions between gurus and students” (p. 91).

Chapter 5 draws the first biographical part of the book to an end by outlining the final period of Rangjung Dorje’s life (1333-39), from his role as an advisor to the emperor Toghun Temür at the Mongol court up to his death and subsequent reincarnation as the Fourth Karmapa Rölpe Dorje (Rol pe rDo rje, 1340-83).

Part 2, which constitutes a little less than half of the book, introduces a selection of exemplary translations of Rangjung Dorje’s oeuvre. Here, Gamble portrays two important legacies of Rangjung Dorje: the institution of the Karmapa reincarnation lineage and his material legacy, particularly his writings. This section starts with two short biographical or hagiographical works (*rnam thar*) from his Collected Sayings, which are part of a larger work, the *Liberation Story of the Great Rangjung Dorje*. These are followed by a heterogeneous assortment of writings: a few short hagiographic texts, some songs and prayers, as well as brief teachings on the Buddhist doctrine. In this way, Gamble allows the reader to access part of the source material discussed in the first section of the book that, as she notes, “played an important role in establishing Rangjung Dorje’s reputation as Karma Pakshi’s reincarnation” (p. 139).

This book is highly entertaining as the author takes us on a journey to explore Rangjung Dorje and his time. However, this strength is also one of its few weaknesses. In general, the main sources for Gamble’s exposition of Rangjung Dorje’s life are two sets of short texts, preserved in the 2006 edition of Rangjung Dorje’s Collected Sayings edited by mKhan po Lo yag bKra shis and published in Tsurpu: *The Liberation Story of the Great Rangjung Dorje* (dPal chen rang byung rdo rje’i rnam thar, vol. nga, 353-73) and *The Verse Liberation Story of Rangjung Dorje* (Thams cad mkhyen pa rin po che rang byung rdo rje rnam par thar pa tshigs sub cad pa, vol. nga, 374-414).

Gamble seems to treat most of the accounts contained therein as autobiographical, firsthand descriptions, even though passages discussing the time before his birth in *The Liberation Story of the In-Between State* that forms part of *The Liberation Story of the Great Rangjung Dorje* seem to her to be an exception and she voices concerns about its authorship attribution: “The extant version of the *Liberation Story of the In-Between State*, a story he claims elsewhere to have dictated to a kindly abbot, does not read like a Rangjung Dorje composition. It has neither the directness nor clarity of expression that is typical of his style” (pp. 23-24).

One would have therefore welcomed a slightly more cautious evaluation of the sources, especially the “autobiographical” ones. Texts contained in works of the Tibetan collected sayings-type generally need to be treated with great care, as they may have originated as the oral teachings, lecture notes, or writings of an author, his disciples, or later masters of the tradition. These texts may, then, have undergone a history of oral transmission, have been handed down via hand-copied manuscripts or modified by later editors of printing stocks (or present-day electronic typesetters). In short, they may have passed through many hands as they were transmitted by the tradition. As observed by Marta Sernesi, “textual production may be understood as a complex process during which many different individuals contribute to shape the extant text, and thus could be legitimately called its ‘author.’”<sup>[2]</sup> If we understand such texts as multiauthor works, we may be disinclined to consider statements contained therein as providing us with firsthand information on the supposed author only. This does not lessen the importance of these writings, as they still provide valuable information on the author(s), the tradition, and its evolution. Particularly when dealing with someone who has been as instrumental in establishing the Karmapa reincarnation lineage and the identity of the Karma Kagyü tradition as Rangjung Dorje, we should bear in mind that his autobiography must have invited later redactions

for different reasons. It may have been, for example, in the mutual interest of himself and later editors to establish him as Karma Pakshi's rebirth.

Apart from this minor formal criticism, Ruth Gamble's *The Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje. Master of Mahāmudrā* represents an excellent new contribution to Shambhala's Lives of the Masters series.[3] It is a well-written, highly informative introduction to the life of this luminous figure, based on multiple sources. Furthermore, its scope transcends the individual Rangjung Dorje since it provides insights into a period that was important for the formation of both the Karmapa reincarnation lineage and the Karma Kagyü tradition. As such, it is essential reading for Tibetologists as well as individuals interested in Tibetan Buddhism in general and the early Kagyü tradition and evolution of the Karmapa reincarnation lineage in particular.

#### Notes

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[1]. Rolf Scheuermann, “sGam po pa’s Doctrinal System: A Programmatic Way to Buddhahood for Beings of Varying Capacity, Both Gradual and Sudden?,” *Revue d’Études Tibétaines* 37 (December 2016): 335-51.

[2]. Marta Sernesi, “The Collected Sayings of the Master: On Authorship, Author-function, and Authority,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36/37 (2015): 459-98, 490.

[3]. This relatively new series contains currently the following further works on Indo-Tibetan masters: Donald S. Lopez, *Gendun Chopel: Tibet’s Modern Visionary* (2018); James B. Apple, *Atiśa Dīpaṃkara: Illuminator of the Awakened Mind* (2019); Thubten Jinpa, *Tsongkhapa: A Buddha in the Land of Snow* (2019); and Klaus Dieter Mathes, *Maitrīpa: India’s Yogi of Nondual Bliss* (2021).