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To the growing scholarly literature on female deities of Tibetan Buddhism, Rachael Stevens adds an important and unique contribution with her book on Red Tārā. Much has been written about the better-known forms of the goddess—the White, the Green, and the Twenty-one Tārās—and their Indian origins. Previous scholarship by Stephen Beyer (1973), Martin Willson (1986), Miranda Shaw (2006), and more recently Susan A. Landesman (2020) has provided an important ground for understanding the historical evolution, diversity of expressions, and foundational texts of the Mahāyāna Tārā cults in India and Tibet. Additional contributions have been made by Tibetan lamas such as Bokar Rinpoche (2001), Khenpo Karthar (2003), Khenchen Palden Sherab and Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal (2007), and Lama Zopa Rinpoche (2018). However, when focusing on these presentations, the practitioner and scholar may be left with an impression that Tārā is primarily a peaceful, motherly, and gentle deity in the Tibetan pantheon.

Stevens's work focuses on the tantric manifestations of Tārā in her semi-wrathful mode as subjugator and magnetizer. Red Tārā emerges from the ritual dimensions of the Four Actions (Tib. *'phrin las bzhi*) that express the skillful activities of the deity, each successively more wrathful: pacifying (Tib. *zhi ba'i 'phrin las*/Skt. *śānticāra*), increasing/enriching (rgyas pa'i *'phrin las*/pauṣṭika), subjugating/magnetizing (*dbang gi 'phrin las*/vaśīkaraṇa), and destroying (*drag po'i 'phrin las*/abhicāra). These progressive methods are employed through enlightened intent to accomplish the enlightened manifestations of the deity by harnessing worldly and spiritual resources and supports. These dimensions of ritual and enlightened activity are by nature esoteric in tantric practice, and as such little elucidated in scholarly literature and discourse.

Stevens demonstrates her respect for and appreciation of the esoteric nature of the material she is presenting by refraining from much elaboration of the meaning of the “power” and “subjugation” aspects of Red Tārā. This brings a tender mix-
ture of satisfaction and disappointment to the reader who wants to learn more about tantric ritual and its applications, as Stevens’s descriptions of rituals and iconography read at times more like a catalog of practices and a taxonomy of iconographic details than an exposition itself. Nevertheless, her study is an invaluable resource for understanding the history and development of Red Tārā from India to Tibet as well as the diversity of lineages of practice and veneration from ancient times to the present. This provides an important foundation for Tārā studies from this point forward.

Stevens’s monograph includes an introduction, eleven chapters (divided into two parts), and seven appendices (followed by notes, a bibliography, and an index). Part 1 (“The Goddess”) focuses broadly on Tārā in her more renowned forms, tracing the origins of her cult from both historical and mythological perspectives. It begins with Tāranātha’s (1575-1634) source text that elucidates Princess Wisdom Moon’s resolve to attain enlightenment in the body of a woman, contravening the prevalent understanding of the limitations of the female body. Her words—“Therefore, until saṃsāra is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman’s body” (p. 4)—are a testimony to her understanding of the ultimate essencelessness of gender.

Stevens traces the Indian Tārā cult from both Hinduism and Buddhism, placing the origins of Buddhist practice of Tārā from the sixth and seventh centuries CE in the Mahāyāna caves of Nasik, Ellora, and Kānheri. Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) is said to have brought the practice of the Twenty-one Tārās to Tibet in the eighth century and to have hidden, with his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, several Tārā termas (gter ma) in the landscape of Tibet for future practitioners. It was the Indian Mahāyāna master Atiśa (982-1054) who sealed Tārā into the Tibetan spiritual imagination when he consolidated her practice in Tibet in the eleventh century. The renowned Rime master Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820-92) initiated a revival of Tārā practice as part of his revitalization of practice lineages, and his successors have carried Tārā devotion to the present day. She is now practiced in all four the Tibet’s major lineages and is popular among lay practitioners throughout the entire Tibetan community, both on the plateau and in diaspora.

The first three chapters set the ground for an examination of the more practical aspects of the practice of Tārā. In chapter 4 in fact, Stevens addresses the Mahāyāna practice of Tārā, in which the classic boons are bestowed by becoming the goddess: freedom from fear, generating merit, receiving blessings, and wishes fulfilled, and the classic meditative realizations (siddhis) associated with the path to buddhahood. Here she speaks of the multiple dimensions of the goddess as compassionate mother and savior who protects and liberates. She then introduces Tārā as a tantric medi- tational deity (yidam) in which the practitioner becomes Tārā in sādhana practice, preliminary to her comprehensive treatment of the tantric Red Tārā.

In part 2 (“The Red Goddess”), Stevens turns to the tantric dimensions of the red goddess’s cult in Tibet, discussing the role of subjugation in tantric practice. In esoteric oral traditions, ritual pujas are performed with their respective deities accomplishing the Four Actions, each associated with its corresponding color: pacifying in white, increasing/enriching in yellow, subjugating/magnetizing in red, and destroying in black. These rituals performed in prescribed environments with their respective colors express the enlightened, skillful activities of the deity in accomplishing the greatest benefit for sentient beings through nonconceptual activity.

Stevens helpfully glosses the purposes of each of the Four Actions: pacifying creates a peaceful ground; enriching increases merit and resources that nurture dharma practice as well as permitting knowledge to deepen; subjugating/magnetiz-
ing attracts patrons and dharma students, as well as the worldly and spiritual power to overcome obstacles; and destroying removes obstacles to success and realization. Red Tārā is one of the most important subjugating deities in the Tibetan pantheon.

The second part of the book impressively surveys the multiple lineages of Red Tārā practices and representations, showing her rituals, her iconographic varieties, and her resemblance to other related deities. Most similar is the cult of Kurukullā, known as the goddess of love and often addressed as Red Tārā, despite her different ritual details and iconography. She is depicted wielding the flower-bedecked bow and arrow, with which she bestows the wisdom of enlightened passion on her devotees, yet her secret powers are found in subjugating. The benefits of her practice have tipped toward the worldly over time, though the realization of enlightened passion wisdom has retained its importance. Red Tārā is also associated with Pīṭheśvarī, the goddess-protector of the twenty-four sacred places. Here Red Tārā presides over the intimate relationship between the sacred places of pilgrimage in the landscapes of India and Tibet and the inner, subtle body with its respective sacred sites of the yogic channels. This ties Red Tārā to the ḍākinī traditions of Tibet, which protect tantric practice and realization through rendering yogic siddhi accessible only to the empowered and prepared practitioner, tying pilgrimage and personal yogic practice in a powerful way.

In her survey, Stevens lays out the wide array of iconographic representations of tantric Red Tārā. In chapter 9, for instance, she shows how Red Tārā peeks through the Twenty-one Tārās from a variety of lineages, each of which has red versions of the goddess in particularly powerful modes, all with an element of subjugation: the swift and heroic, the granter of boons, the destroyer of attachments, the victorious, the fierce, the blazing radiant, and she who stops countless violent activities. The reader yearns to see plates of these forms of Tārā in this and previous chapters; the study would have benefited from the addition of more plates, especially in color, in support of the narrative. Still, we learn that Red Tārā can be similar to her peaceful representations in sometimes sitting in the customary pose with the mudrās of wish-granting and three jewels, holding the utpala flower, but this Red Tārā also holds a vase of immortality in her extended right hand. In her most tantric forms, her jewels and silks are replaced with the funerary ornaments of a ḍākinī—a crown of skulls and jewelry fashioned from discarded bones. In her tantric forms, she is often standing in the dancing pose with the bent right leg raised, and she sometimes appears with additional arms wielding a ḍākinī skullcup, hooked scepter, and noose, the latter two weapons of capture typical of subjugating deities. Sometimes she mixes the customary princess ornaments with the funerary ones, showing the bridge between her peaceful Mahāyāna forms and her tantric ones.

It is clear that throughout her study, Stevens is not merely reporting on an archaic cult, for she periodically references the living traditions of Red Tārā practice, including those popular in some Western dharma communities. She especially traces the terma cycle of Apong Tertön (1895-1945), a treasure-revealer whose practice is carried on in communities founded by Nyingma teacher Chagdud Tulku (1930-2002). Apong Tertön’s birth and life in Serta was surrounded by miraculous accounts, portending his prolific life as a treasure-revealer. (His daughter, Khandro Tare Lhamo [1938-2003], was a renowned tertön in her own right.)[1] Upon his death, he ensured the transmission of his terma at the perilous time of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and it was one of his trusted monks who transmitted these teachings to Chagdud Tulku, who practiced them in retreat. These teachings and Chagdud Tulku’s own treasures were foundational in his Oregon community after 1980 and have been widely practiced by his international sangha since then. The last
chapter of the book describes the vitality of this lineage of practice of Red Tārā.

In the appendices, Stevens concludes her study by providing her nuanced translations of a series of short Red Tārā sādhana—some of them only partially translated to guard their esoteric nature—that provide a look at the variety and vividness of Red Tārā practices. Altogether, this book is a treasure that effectively reveals the power and magic of Red Tārā practice without violating the indispensable protective tantric secrecy of her respective lineages. The overall effect is to give the reader deeper and more profound respect for the multiple skillful ways in which the healing and inspiring lineages of the goddess have manifested uncompromisingly as powerful and direct support for realization.

Note


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