



Luminous Lives. By Cyrus Stearns. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001, xiv + 305 pages, ISBN 0-86171-307-9 (paperback), US \$34.9.5

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The tantric Buddhist practice of the "Path with Its Fruit" (lam 'bras) is the most prominent cycle of teachings within the Sa-skya lineage. Going back to the mah siddha Vir pa, it was introduced in Tibet by the Indian lay pundit Gayadhara (d. 1103). As its teachings expanded in Tibet, a large body of indigenous literature grew along with it. The literary tradition of this cycle has now been surveyed for the first time by Cyrus Stearns, focusing on its historical and biographical works. While investigating records of the Sa-skya lineage kept in the archives of Nepal, he discovered a historical work that until recently had been unavailable even to the masters of the tradition, i.e., *The Incisive Vajra* (Zhib mo rdo rje) by Sa-skya Pa ita's disciple dMar-ston Chos-kyi-rgyal-po, who can now be dated to ca. 1198-ca. 1259.

The text, based on three manuscripts, and its translation form the core of Stearns's book (part two, pp. 79-169). The chapters on the "Literary Tradition," "Early Masters in Tibet," and "dMar-ston and the Zhib mo rdo rje" (part one, pp. 9-78), as well as a detailed annotation (pp. 171-261), surround that core with a wealth of information that Stearns obtained from numberless historical key works of the Sa-skya tradition.

In chapter one, Stearns identifies the earliest written sources of the Sa-skyapa Lam 'bras teachings. The root was the rDo rje tshig rkang, i.e., instructions that Vir pa received from Nari tmy , the consort of Hevajra, through which he quickly reached the sixth spiritual level (bh mi). These were transmitted orally in India and came to Tibet through Gayadhara (d. 1103) and 'Brog-mi Lo-tso -ba (993-1077?). Later on, Sa-chen Kun-dga'-snying-po wrote them down, probably in 1141. At the request of eleven separate disciples, Sa-chen also composed eleven commentaries. Stearns provides short descriptions of each and mentions different opinions of Tibetan scholars regarding which titles belong to this set of eleven works (pp. 16-25). He also mentions commentaries by Sa-chen's disciples, and, among these, particularly the one(s) by Phag-mo-gru-pa rDo-rje-rgyal-po, who remained from approximately 1138 to 1150 with Sa-chen and later became a famous disciple of sGam-po-pa. On pages 26-32, Stearns records the significant discovery that Phag-mo-gru-pa was the real author of a number of important Lam 'bras texts in the Yellow Book (pod ser), which was compiled and apparently "re-authored" in parts by Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan. The Sa-skyapa sources remain silent about Phag-mo-gru-pa's true role in formulating some of the major Lam 'bras texts, while the bKa'-brgyud-pa sources appear to belittle the guru-disciple relation of Sa-chen and Phag-mo-gru-pa. Thus both sides felt awkward about this episode.

During the first part of Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan's life, the works on Lam 'bras by both his father, Sa-chen, and apparently Phag-mo-gru-pa, too, were kept wrapped in a yellow cloth — hence the name "yellow book" (pod ser). Later, Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan supplemented these with a number of small texts, and rewrote or edited Phag-mo-gru-pa's contributions. Stearns provides an overview of the contents of this collection (pp. 32-35).

In this same first chapter, Stearns also reports on the Lam 'bras works of later disciples. In doing so, he briefly touches upon the

collections of the "black book" (pod nag, pp. 36 ff.), "small red book" (pusti dmar chung, p. 38), "volume of minor [instructions]" (glegs bam phra mo, p. 39), and "explication for disciples" (slob bshad, pp. 39-45). All these introductions are very helpful and informative, for these volumes have never been described before in a modern scholarly publication.

In chapter two, Stearns faces the problem of the "Mystery of Gayadhara" (pp. 47-55), certainly another highlight of the book. Anyone who has ever tried to untangle the Indian part of tantric transmission lineages knows of the many problems involved. Frequently fantastic life-spans are attributed to Indian masters — even hundreds of years! Several different people may have had the same name. A single master may have used two, three, or even more names. Often the accounts found in different sources are grossly contradictory. Sometimes one finds suspicious similarities among the life stories of different masters. In the case of Gayadhara, all occur. And, as if that is not enough, a master of that name is completely unknown to Indian sources! Nevertheless, by "sifting through the available sources" (p. 51), Stearns finds agreement in different traditions, as well as singular details such as his caste name, a description of Gayadhara's accomplishments, etc. He notices isolated references and compares the accounts of different traditions, and examines their relations and how accounts were later brought into agreement. In short, by analyzing more than thirty-five sources, he manages to extract at least a few facts about the life of this important master.

Another significant clarification by Stearns concerns "The Red Pa ita/ c rya." This problematic figure has haunted Tibetologists for some time.¹ Stearns could now ascertain that not one, but two Indian masters traveled in Tibet under this name during this period, and, to complicate matters, both were teachers of 'Brog-mi Lo-tso -ba, namely Gayadhara and Prajñ gupta. Since an c rya dMar-po was severely condemned for spreading evil doctrines and perverted tantric sexual

practices in Tibet, 'Jam-dbyang-mkhyen-brtse'i-dbang-phyug specifically noted that Gayadhara should not be confused with another " -tsa-ra dMar-po" found in lineages of teachings such as those of the tantric guardian goddess dMag-sor-ma (pp. 52 and 191, n. 232). In the remaining part of chapter two, Stearns describes his findings with regard to the early masters of Lam 'bras in Tibet (pp. 55-67). In chapter three, he introduces the author of the *Zhib mo rdo rje* and the work itself, whose Tibetan text and translation form part two of the book.

Among the few minor problems that I noticed, one notable example is that Stearns identifies as the root instruction of the Lam 'bras the so-called "rDo rje tshig rkang." He translates the title as "The Vajra Verses," understanding rdo rje'i tshig rkang, with "Vajra" being the qualifier for "Verses." The Tibetan term tshig rkang, however, rather seems to refer to a stanza than to verses (for which the Tibetan expression is tshigs bcad — as opposed to tshigs lhug, "prose"). In general, I wonder whether here the term rdo rje'i tshig might be alluded to. With that expression, perhaps best rendered as "vajra-utterance," commentators often refer to outstanding statements in authoritative works, intending to point out that the statement is unfalsifiable.² When Sa-chen Kun-dga'-snying-po (1092-1158) finally wrote down the rDo rje tshig rkang, he did not employ a verse structure.³ This short title might thus perhaps be rendered "Vajra Lines" or "Vajra Utterances." In structure, it might best be described as a tantric gradual-path (lam rim) instruction.

On page 11, Stearns informs us that different versions of the rDo rje tshig rkang were found in the Zha-ma, 'Brom, and Sa-skya traditions. The first two of these traditions are mentioned several times in the first part of the book, but only on page 58 and 60 respectively does it become clear that these go back to 'Brom De-pa sTon-chung, a disciple of 'Brog-mi Lo-ts -ba (993-1077?), and Ma-gcig Zha-ma (1062-1149), who studied under Se-ston, another disciple of 'Brog-mi.

The Zha-ma and 'Brom traditions appear in this book only as transmitters of differing historical accounts. Other distinctive characteristics are neither mentioned nor known.

On page 18, Stearns describes the first of Sa-chen Kun-dga'-snying-po's eleven commentaries on the rDo rje tshig rkang, the A seng ma, which is also known as the Don bsdus ma.⁴ In the Tibetan text of the Zhib mo rdo rje (p. 152) and its translation (p. 153), as well as in note 237 (p. 255), however, the same work is referred to as "Lam 'bras mdor bsdus ma," without referring to its first mentioning.

On page 20, Stearns introduces the third of Sa-chen's eleven commentaries, namely the Bande ma. The work is named after a certain Bande gShin-rje-grags, "one of rJe-btsun Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan's four disciples with 'grags' at the end of their names." The source for this remark appears to be Mang-thos-klu-sgrub's bsTan brtsis (p. 135).⁵ There, however, the full name is given as "N -ro Bande gShin-rje-grags." Curiously enough, another — or perhaps the same — "N -ro Bande" is also mentioned as a direct disciple of Sa-chen (p. 131). The latter is also mentioned in the Great Genealogy (fol. 57v).⁶ There, however, the spelling is "sNa-ro Bande." Could these have been one and the same person? If so, since Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan was only eleven years old at Sa-chen's death, the Bande was probably older than Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan.

On page 23, Stearns introduces the last — and probably most famous — of the eleven commentaries, the gNyags ma, which has this name because it was composed at the request of a certain gNyags dBang-phyug-rgyal-mtshan. The work is referred to throughout the book as "gNyags ma," but in the bibliography it appears under gZhung bshad gnyags ma.

The Rin chen snang ba (Illuminating the Jewel) that is mentioned on page 33 appears in the bibliography under Kun gzhi rgyu rgyud las 'phros nas 'khor 'das dbyer med kyi lta ba'i rtsa ba, as is also mentioned in the note. "Rin chen snang ba" is a poetical title from the colophon.

As far as I know, the text is most often referred to as the 'Khor 'das dbyer med (kyi rtsa ba) (Inseparability of Sa.ms ra and Nirv a).

The only Sa-skyia Lam 'bras histories that predate the Zhib mo rdo rje are two small contributions by Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan, namely the Bla ma brgyud pa rgya gar ba'i lo rgyus and the Bla ma brgyud pa bod kyi lo rgyus, mentioned on page 35. Stearns identifies them with the works that are reproduced in volume eleven of the Sa skyia Lam 'bras Literature Series, pp. 581-593 and 594-599. I find it interesting to note that the same two texts can be found in a different edition at the very beginning of the same collection, in volume one, pp. 1-13 and 13-18, and also in a further edition in Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan's collected works, Sa skyia pa'i bka' 'bum, volume three, no. 11, fols. 342r-348r and 348r-350v. The relation of these editions has not been studied as of yet.

On page 35, Stearns identifies dKar Sh kya-grags as a major disciple of Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan, referring to a Lam 'bras history by Mang-thos-klus-sgrub (p. 163).² But that particular passage does not identify dKar Sh kya-grags as Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan's disciple. In another history — the bsTan rtsis (p. 150) — Mang-thos-klus-sgrub clearly identifies him as a direct disciple of Sa-skyia Pa ita.

With regard to the transmission of the Zhib mo rdo rje, Stearns notes (p. 73) that no separate reading transmission (lung) exists for it today. The same work was transmitted at least down to A-mes-zhabs (1597-1659) through his uncle bSod-nams-dbang-po (1559-1621). The entry in A-mes-zhabs's record of teachings (gsan yig) says: "Bod kyi lo rgyus rgyas pa by dMar" (fol. 6v).³

On pages 76 f, Stearns provides evidence that the annotations in the Zhib mo rdo rje go back to Tshogs-sgom-pa, a direct disciple of Sa-pa . In doing so, he refers (p. 77) to an anonymous biography, which is attributed in a list of dKon-mchog-bstan-pa-rab-rgyas (d. 1801) to gNyag sNying-po-rgyal-mtshan. I can second that through the record of teachings of Ngag-dbang-chos-grags, fol. 13r/v, where the

Tshogs bsgom rin po che'i nram thar is also clearly attributed to gNyag sNying-po-rgyal-mtshan (and which was probably the source for dKon-mchog-bstan-pa-rab-rgyas).⁹

In the translation on page 89, Stearns translates the Tibetan term sgrub thabs as "method for realization." This is, in my opinion, overly literal and to be avoided. "sGrub thabs" goes back to Skt. s dhana, which means, in the context of a ritual, "conjuring up," "summoning," or "a means of summoning or conjuring up a spirit (or deity)" (Monier-Williams). Something like "evocation [ritual]" would be preferable here.

On page 179, n. 97, Stearns mentions a work by Ngag-dbang-chos-grags. I have been able to locate its full title in his record of teachings received: Lam 'bras rdo rje tshig gi 'grel pa gnyag ma'i dgongs don gsal bar byed pa gsung ngag bstan pa'i nyin byed (fol. 80r).¹⁰

Probably as a result of a macro gone awry, the name of Sa-pa 's nephew, Chos-rgyal 'Phags-pa, is spelled almost throughout the book "Phag-pa" (for example, pp. 24, 28, 36, etc.).

Luminous Lives appears in the new series Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism of Wisdom Publications, Boston. To present a book at the same time to both specialists and non-specialists is a challenge, which the book under review has overcome, setting a standard for future publications. Stearns has translated all Tibetan book titles into English when they appear for the first time. This is a courtesy to the reader that many scholarly publications omit. In a book intended for a wider audience, I would even go so far as to provide only English titles (leaving Tibetan titles in a glossary). Tibetan (or Sanskrit) book titles, especially the short titles that are used for citations (such as "Pod ser," "rDo rje tshig rkang"), are often obscure, even for someone who reads Tibetan — unless he happens to be a specialist in that particular subject. Titles translated into English are easier to memorize and keep apart for the normal reader.

Stearns has also relegated almost all specialized discussions to his annotations. The main part of the book is presented as a continuous text. A scholar may regret that the notes do not appear as footnotes on the same page, but this practice has fallen almost completely out of use in the U.S. Regarding his endnotes, I think continuously numbered notes would have been preferable. When looking up a note, readers do not want to interrupt their train of thought by keeping a note number and a page number or chapter number in mind.

The presentation of the Tibetan text with the translation on facing pages is a laudable development at Wisdom.¹¹ For readers of both languages it is ideal. I wonder, however, whether there was no better way for presenting the interlinear annotations of the Tibetan text and their translation other than printing them in gray. I would suggest the use of a slightly smaller font. Sometimes up to six lines of Tibetan text are kept on the bottom of a page, though they belong to the translation three pages further (p. 104). These are, however, very minor matters.

The book is written in very clear English, as far as I can judge, and I only had to look up a single word ("regurgitate," on page 121). The translation appears to be excellent. Stearns has developed an elegant style for rendering the sometimes very condensed Tibetan sentences. Difficult or especially old terminology has been discussed with mKhan-po A-pad, one of the great living scholars of the tradition (p. 229, n. 102, etc.). In one or two cases, Stearns noted that a particular Tibetan phrase remained completely mysterious and had to be left untranslated.

I have studied Stearns's book and have gained great benefit from it. I do not doubt that it will remain a standard reference work for future studies on the Lam 'bras. Stearns's competence in this difficult field is established beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Footnotes

(72)(1) See, for example, David Seyfort Rugg (1981) "Deux probl

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- (1) See, for example, David Seyfort Ruegg (1981) "Deux problèmes d'exégèse et de pratique tantriques." In: *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 20, [Taoist Studies in Honour of R.A. Stein, vol. 1] 220 ff.; Giacomella Orofino (1992) "Divination with Mirrors: Observations on a Simile Found in the Kaalacakra Literature. PIATS Fagernes, vol. 2, p. 622; Jan-Ulrich Sobisch (1997) "Preliminary Remarks on the Three-Vow Theories (sdom pa gsum) of Tibetan Buddhism." In: *Tibetan Studies. (Proceedings of the 7th Seminar of the IATS, Graz). Wien, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 2, pp. 895 f.*
- (2) In this sense one finds Go-rams-pa bSod-nams-seng-ge referring to a statement of Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan (see sDom gsum rab dbye'i spyi don yid bzhin nor bu, Sa skya pa'i bka' 'bum, *The Complete Works of the Great Masters of the Sa-skyapa Sect of the Tibetan Buddhism*, Tokyo, The Tooyoo Bunkoo, 1969, vol. 14/4, fol. 70v). See also the dGongs gcig of the 'Bri-gung-pa master 'Jig-rten-mgon-po (see, for example, rDo-rje-shes-rab, dGongs gcig yig cha, detailed presentation of 'Bri-gung 'Jig-rten-mgon-po's dGongs gcig precepts of Mahaayaana Buddhist philosophy by dBon-po Shes-rab-'byung-gnas (1187-1241), Bir (H. P.), D. Tsondu Senghe, 1975, vol. 1, pp. 431, 438; vol. 2, pp. 322, 325.
- (3) The full title of the work is Lam 'bras bu dang bcas pa'i gdams ngag dang man ngag tu bcas pa. In: *Sa skya Lam 'bras Literature Series*, vol. 11, pp. 10-19. Dehra Dun. Sakya Centre. 1983.
- (4) Thams cad kyi don bsdus pa'i tshigs su bcad pa. In: *Sa skya Lam 'bras Literature Series*, vol. 11 ("pod ser"), fols. 94v-96r.
- (5) Mang-thos-klu-sgrub-rgya-mtsho, bsTan rtsis gsal ba'i nyin byed, tha snyad rig gnas lnga'i byung tshul. Bod rang skyong ljongs spyi tshigs tshan rig khang gi bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang (gra sgrig) nas bsgrigs. Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang. 1987.

- (6) Sa skya gdung rab chen mo, i.e., the 'Dzam gling byang phyogs kyi thub pa'i rgyal tshab chen po dpal ldan sa skya pa'i gdung rabs rin po che ji ltar byon pa'i tshul gyi rnam par thar pa ngo mtshar rin po che'i bang mdzod dgos 'dod kun 'byung. Ochghat. 1975.
- (7) Mang-thos-klu-sgrub-rgya-mtsho, gSung ngag slob bshad khog phub gnad kyi be'u bum. Sa skya Lam 'bras Literature Series, vol. 18, pp. 161-183. Dehra Dun. Sakya Centre. 1983.
- (8) Chos kyi rje dpal ldan bla ma dam pa rnam la dam pa'i chos ji ltar thos pa'i tshul legs par bshad pa zab rgyas chos kun gsal ba'i nyin byed las rje btsun grub pa'i 'khor lo bsgyur ba dpal ldan sa skya pa chen po 'jam mgon bsod nams dbang po'i zhal snga nas kyi rjes su bzung ba'i sarka, dbu-med manuscript (vol. kha of a collection of manuscripts containing the works of A-mes-zhabs Ngag-dbang-kun-dga'-bsod-nams, 32 fols.).
- (9) Chos kyi rje dpal ldan bla ma dam pa rnam las dam pa'i chos ji ltar thos pa'i tshul legs par bshad pa zab rgyas chos kun gsal ba'i nyin byed ces bya ba las mkhan chen 'jam pa'i dbyangs ngag dbang chos kyi grags pa'i zhal snga nas kyi rjes su bzung ba'i sarka, dbu-med manuscript (vol. kha of a collection of manuscripts containing the works of A-mes-zhabs Ngag-dbang-kun-dga'-bsod-nams, 81 fols.).
- (10) This is the same record of teachings mentioned in the previous footnote.
- (11) It was first employed in John Petit's book *Mipham's Beacon and Cyrus S tearns's Hermit of Go Cliffs*.