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*Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and  
their Performers in Tibet and the Himalayas*

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# A Review of *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and their Performers in Tibet and the Himalayas*

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*Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and their Performers in Tibet and the Himalayas*. Edited by Sarah Jacoby and Antonio Terrone. Leiden: Brill, 2009, 202 pages, ISBN 978-90-04-17600-3 (cloth), \$136.00.

*Buddhism Beyond the Monastery* collects seven articles, each of which looks at the practice of non-monastic Buddhism in Tibet. In their introduction, Jacoby and Terrone define non-monastic Buddhism as “popular beliefs, customs, communal gatherings, festivals and ceremonies, and religious rituals typically performed by non-celibate religious professionals” (1). This volume, therefore, includes within its purview practices as disparate as rituals for community prosperity, spirit mediumship, treasure revelation, and tantric sexual practices. While these practices touch on many different aspects of Tibetan religiosity, they are united in being performed by individuals who have not been ordained as Buddhist monks. Despite the importance of such practices and practitioners to Tibetan life, these aspects of non-celibate Tibetan Buddhism have remained little studied, especially when compared with the voluminous literature dedicated to understanding celibate monastic philosophies and practices. *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery* not only calls attention to this lacuna, but for a slim volume of 202 pages, does an impressive job of filling it.

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Following Jacoby and Terrone's short introduction, the volume opens with Heather Stoddard's article, "Eat it up or Throw it to the Dogs? Dge 'dun chos 'phel (1903–1951), Ma cig lab sgron (1055–1153) and Pha dam pa sangs rgyas (d. 1117): A Ramble Through the Burial Grounds of Ordinary and 'Holy' Beings in Tibet." Stoddard explores the roots of the practice of sky burial—leaving corpses to be consumed by vultures. This custom is strikingly different from the burial practices of the Spu rgyal Empire (early seventh century–mid ninth century). Stoddard notes that most archeologists she has spoken to argue that the practice has its origins in the *gcod* practices introduced by Pha dam pa sangs rgyas and Ma cig lab sgron. Stoddard, on the other hand, argues that the practice of sky burial is rooted in Zoroastrian beliefs and practices, transmitted to Tibet through neighboring Sogdiana during the Spu rgyal Empire. The practice of sky burial thus exemplifies the adoption of non-Buddhist (and non-Tibetan) practices into Tibetan culture.

Stoddard's article is followed by Sarah Jacoby's "To be or not to be Celibate: Morality and Consort Practices According to the Treasure Revealer Se ra mkha' 'gro's (1892–1940) Auto/biographical Writings." While Stoddard's article focused on the early *phyi dar* period (late tenth–early twelfth centuries), Jacoby's article focuses on the eastern Tibetan region of Khams in the early twentieth century, and the role of celibacy in the process of revealing treasure teachings (*gter ma*). Jacoby recounts Se ra mkha' 'gro's conflicted feelings regarding whether she should adopt a morally pure, celibate lifestyle, or undertake sexual practices that would enhance her ability to reveal treasures, but which ran the risk of alienating those around her. Ultimately, Se ra mkha' 'gro decides to pursue a non-celibate track, despite the risk to her reputation. In discussing Se ra mkha' 'gro's internal debates over this issue, Jacoby offers valuable insight into not only the importance of sexual practices to treasure revelation, but also to the ways in which religious leaders of this time had to balance their own inclinations with the expectations of the society they lived in.

Antonio Terrone's article, "Householders and Monks: A Study of Treasure Revealers and their Role in Religious Revival in Contemporary Eastern Tibet," also addresses questions of celibacy in Khams, though this article (along with the rest of the articles in this book) focuses on contemporary Tibet. One of the most striking features of religious practice in contemporary Khams is the importance of the religious institutions known as encampments (*sgar*). These encampments are generally located outside of traditional monasteries and offer monks, nuns and laypeople an alternative venue for study and practice. Terrone argues that the increasing popularity of such encampments is due to government restrictions placed on traditional monasteries as well as to the charismatic personalities and miraculous activities of the treasure revealers the encampments are centered around. Terrone provides a detailed analysis of the lives of two such treasure revealers, the celibate monk Grub dbang lung rtogs rgyal mtshan and the married Tantric practitioner Bde chen 'od gsal rdo rje. In so doing he reveals the importance of treasure revelation and its associated miracles in the regeneration of Buddhism in contemporary Khams, while also highlighting the different approaches available to celibate and married religious leaders. Both Jacoby and Terrone's articles should be considered essential reading for anyone interested in the role of gender and celibacy in Tibetan religion, as well as those interested in the religious history of Khams more broadly.

"Local Community Rituals' in Bhutan: Documentation and Tentative Reading," Françoise Pommaret's contribution to this volume, offers a preliminary analysis of data concerning a large number of multi-day religious festivals meant to please local deities. Even though most Bhutanese define these rituals as part of the non-Buddhist Bon tradition, Pommaret notes that most of the participants are, in fact, devout Buddhists. These rituals, she concludes, demonstrate the way in which Buddhism, rather than opposing local religious traditions as it spread in to Bhutan, incorporated them into its collection of ritual practices. While Pommaret insists several times that her conclusions on this matter are

preliminary, her article nonetheless offers an important look at interactions between Buddhism and Bon in the Bhutanese context. In addition to the article itself Pommaret takes the unusual step of publishing notes on her data, in the form of short descriptions of thirteen rituals filmed in 2003 and 2004. By including these descriptions, Pommaret generously grants access to this raw data to scholars everywhere.

Like Pommaret, Nicolas Sihlé focuses on the divide between institutionalized Buddhism (and Bon) and local religious practices. In “The *Ala* and *Ngakpa* Priestly Traditions of Nyemo (Central Tibet): Hybridity and Hierarchy,” he contrasts the ritual specialists known as *ala* with *sngags pa* Tantric practitioners. Sihlé argues that while the non-celibate *sngags pa* are hereditarily associated with either Buddhism or Bon, the *ala* cannot be readily categorized as one or the other. Thus, Sihlé argues that there is not a clean distinction between institutional Buddhism and local religious practice, but rather a spectrum between hegemonic Buddhist practices on one side, and only partially Buddhicised practices on the other. By doing so, Sihlé complicates the often-reified distinction between institutional and local religion in Tibet.

Danzang Cairang’s article, “The ‘Spirit Mediums’ (*lha pa*) of Reb gong in A mdo (mdo smad reb gong yul gyi lha pa),” provides a look at the history and practices of spirit mediums in the Reb gong region of A mdo. Functioning as the mouthpiece of local deities, mediums performed an essential role as intermediaries between villagers and the deities, and were generally found in every village. Like other aspects of Tibetan religiosity, the activities of mediums were severely restricted during the period of the Democratic Reforms and Cultural Revolution (1958–1978). Following this period, the mediums resumed their role as intermediaries, but the new circumstances of the contemporary period have led to a shift in the beliefs surrounding the practice, somewhat lessening the medium’s divine status in the eyes of their fellow villagers. Danzang Cairang concludes his essay by arguing that the continued belief in the

miraculous abilities of mediums has negatively impacted social development in Amdo, and that the practice should be preserved only as a social custom, rather than a means to guide society. It is also worth noting that Danzang Cairang's article is published in Tibetan, with a short English précis by Dr Yangbum Gyal. There are a number of highly qualified scholars in contemporary Tibet whose work is often unknown to western audiences because it is published only in China, and it is gratifying to see some of it emerge in a volume intended for a European and American audience.

*Buddhism Beyond the Monastery* concludes with an article by Marcia S. Calkowski, "Signs of Transition: On Interpreting some Predictors of *sprul sku* Rebirth." The process of identifying the rebirth (*sprul sku*) of a deceased master has long fascinated western audiences. Most analyses of this phenomenon, however, have focused on the means through which the official search party identifies and tests prospective candidates. Calkowski, on the other hand, turns her attention to the ways that non-specialists living in close proximity to a child—such as relatives—interpret various signs and portents to indicate the possibility that the child is a *sprul sku*. Signs and portents such as dreams, celestial events or other auspicious events may inspire practices on the part of family members that, in turn, may be interpreted by others as signs of the child's legitimacy as a *sprul sku*. Calkowski notes that such local signs rarely influence official search parties, but that they can create a localized sense of certainty around a particular child's status as a *sprul sku*. Calkowski thus offers a valuable contribution to scholar's understanding of the process of recognizing *sprul skus*, as well as insight into the distinctions between local and official legitimacy.

As should be clear, the articles in this volume address the question of non-monastic Buddhism in Tibet from a wide variety of perspectives. As an aggregate volume, perhaps the most interesting question raised by this volume concerns the very nature of its subject: what exactly is it that separates non-monastic Buddhism from monastic

Buddhism? In their introduction, Jacoby and Terrone clearly distinguish these two based on the practice of celibacy: monastic Buddhism is defined as celibate and non-monastic Buddhism is defined as non-celibate (1). This is a useful place to begin such a discussion, but the articles contained in the volume go a long way towards complicating such a division. Jacoby herself makes this point when she notes, “While the dividing lines between celibate and non-celibate Tibetan religious specialists may initially appear clear, the borders between the two have often been far from it” (37). Even setting aside the problems created by supposedly celibate monks who break their vows illicitly, there remain many areas where monasticism and sexual practices overlap in (more or less) institutionally sanctioned ways. Jacoby relates that there are circumstances where a monk who acts out of pure religious intent rather than simple lust can legitimately engage in sexual practices without breaking his vows (68). Terrone, on the other hand, notes that while in the past almost all treasure revealers were non-celibate, many (though not all) of those in contemporary Khams are celibate monks (88). These and other similar examples demonstrate the encroachment of non-celibate practices into Tibetan monasticism, and celibate practices into what was once the domain of non-celibate figures. Thus, while celibacy is certainly a useful criterion for separating monastic and non-monastic Buddhism, this volume demonstrates just how complex this distinction is.

Demonstrating this complexity is no small feat, and is *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery's* greatest success. Each of the articles contained in this volume offers important insight into an aspect of Tibetan religiosity and will appeal to specialists of that particular field. As a whole, however, the volume is considerably more than just a collection of interesting articles. By forcing readers to confront the messiness and overlapping definitions of Tibetan religiosity, this volume offers an important contribution to the field of Tibetan Studies, and is recommended to anyone interested in the complexity of lived Tibetan religion, but



particularly to those who study the various permutations of contemporary Tibetan religion.