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Simply Being: Texts in the Dzogchen Tradition. By James Low. London: Vajra Press, 1998, xxiii +179 pages, ISBN: 0953284506, n.p.

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Simply Being is not an academic work. This needs to be stated at the outset firstly because the author has previously co-written the anthropological *Yogins of Ladakh* with Dr. John Crook, and secondly because of a certain aspiration towards academia in *Simply Being*, which is uncomfortably coupled with the author's tendency to make anti-intellectual statements. Before we look at what this book isn't, however, let us examine what it is.

Simply Being is a collection of thirteen translations accompanied by four of the author's lectures. Of the thirteen translations, only five turn out to be *rdzogs chen* texts. Of the others, five are standard teachings on the meditations and contemplations associated with the *sngon 'gro* ("preliminaries"), one is a treatise on the *madhyamaka*, and two are songs associated with the *mahāmudrā* tradition. That aside, the translations are the best aspect of the book, Low's approach being intelligent, clear and generally unobtrusive. The original texts are written in the manner of oral instructions (*gdams ngag*) and the style of translation complements the simple, pithy style of most of the authors. Low avoids using any non-English words, which is bound to result in a certain arbitrariness — for example, *sku* (Sanskrit *kāya*) is given as "mode." He does, however, usefully include the Tibetan for some of the technical terms. One of the five *rdzogs chen* texts, the *Tshig gsum gnad brdegs*, has previously been published in translation in *The Golden Letters* by John Reynolds (Snow Lion, 1996). The others are identified as being written by the famous dPal-sprul Rin-po-che, a certain Bye-tshang-pa Chos-rje Rin-po-che (whom Low has been unable to identify) and Padmasambhava (the text is *gSang sngags lam gyi rim pa*). The author offers to send the original Tibetan text for five of the translations, which includes two of the *rdzogs chen* texts, on request.

The lectures are on the subjects of (1) refuge and bodhicitta; (2) the guru, and two commentaries on two of the translations; (3) *Tshig gsum gnad brdegs*; and (4) *gSang sngags lam rim*. In all of these Low has clearly been influenced by the style of Chogyam Trungpa. He is free with the use of modern references and similes, jokes (audience laughter indicated in brackets) and profanities, which may or may not be to the taste of the reader. Whether the lectures adequately represent *rdzogs chen* is another matter. To my mind, there is a lack of clarity in the writing which may in part due to the author's fundamental ambivalence towards Tibetan Buddhism. The frequent assertion that Westerners must evolve a new, appropriate form of Buddhism risks merely abandoning whatever is too complex or difficult to grasp quickly.

There is an uncomfortable generalisation of "East" and "West" involved here; for example, mind-body dualism is stated to be an attribute of

“Western culture” (it does, of course, have a respectable history in “the East”) and *rdzogs chen* is presented as allied to yoga and shiatsu, all of which will help us Westerners to “live in our bodies” (p. xxi). Furthermore, at times Low intentionally or accidentally misinterprets certain Buddhist doctrines in order to show that *rdzogs chen* is a higher teaching. For example, Low cites a proverb that it is easier to put leather on the soles of one’s feet than cover the world with leather. This is presented as a Tibetan saying, though it is present in the *Bodhicāryavatāra* (5.13), where it is used to suggest there is no need to change external events, only one’s own mind. Low misinterprets the proverb as a suggestion to put a buffer between oneself and the world, stating that “this is not the way of dzogchen” (p. xiv).

Returning to my original point about the academic status of the book, the author includes a bibliography, and makes references to it in the text. However, the choice of books is extremely arbitrary, and those that are included are often cited only to be dismissed. Low seems to be uncomfortable when dealing with specifics. In his introduction he writes:

It is important to remember that these texts were not written to stand alone, as a total statement in a non-Buddhist context. Nor were they written as philosophical statements, or as explorations of interesting ideas. It is not my purpose here to explain them or give a detailed commentary or even provide the necessary context: that is an impossible task. However, I do feel it is very important for Western readers to reflect on these issues and make the adjustments that seem necessary (p. xix).

What is the reader to make of this? It is impossible to provide the necessary context, yet the reader must make adjustments based on it? Low tends to become vague and evasive when dealing with questions of information. On the history of *rdzogs chen* he mentions Eva Dargyay’s *Eso-teric Buddhism in Tibet* (why this rather than Samten Karmay’s *The Great Perfection?*) but continues, “I do not intend to explore that area here.” On the three series (*sems sde*, *klong sde* and *man ngag sde*) he mentions books by Herbert Guenther and Tulku Thondup, then continues, “However, the texts here tend to focus on aspects of *Sems-sDe* and *Man-Ngag-sDe* inas-much as they briefly elucidate the view, covering both what enlightenment is and what ignorance is, and then go on to address problems that can arise in practice” (p. xviii). This is not a definition which distinguishes the character of either *sems sde* or *man ngag sde*. This lack of specificity is complemented by an anti-intellectual pose which disparages distinctions and definitions. On the comparison of *rdzogs chen* with *mahāmudrā* Low writes:

When instructions that deal with the absolute nature are compared and contrasted it is not the similarities and differences that are of interest but the process of the comparison. To engage in such a comparison is to enter a mindset that is completely opposed to the content of the texts — and so in a real sense they are protected from abuse by being self-secret (p. 121).

Such statements do not ring true for two reasons. One is the subtle attitude of the great *rNying ma* scholars towards intellectual examination. The eighteenth-century *gter ston* and scholar 'Jigs-med Gling-pa, for example, wrote on *rdzogs chen* and the inability of the intellect to grasp the ultimate nature, but also wrote treatises on history, on all the levels of Buddhist doctrine (the “necessary context“ Low feels is impossible to give?), and indeed, on the distinctions between *mahāmudrā* and *rdzogs chen*. The other reason is that Low’s lectures, though low on information, are themselves highly intellectual. This makes the anti-intellectual statements seem disingenuous, more like a defensive strategy than a true presentation of *rdzogs chen*.

As I have already mentioned, the translations are the best aspect of this book, and if you are interested in short texts in the style of oral instruction on *sngon 'gro* and *rdzogs chen* meditation, then it may be a worthwhile purchase. As an introduction to *rdzogs chen* it is flawed by the faults outlined above, and Namkhai Norbu’s *Dzogchen: The Self-Perfected State* remains a better general introduction to the subject.