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Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire

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Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire

Alyson Prude¹

Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire. By Lama Yeshe. Compiled and edited by Jonathan Landaw. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2014, ISBN 978-61429-155-8 (paperback), \$16.95.

Introduction to Tantra, first published in 1987, republished by Wisdom in 2001, and now reissued in 2014, has become a classic introduction to Vajrayāna Buddhism. Based on teachings given by the Gelug (*dge lugs*)-trained Tibetan monk Lama Yeshe (1935-1984) to his Western students, the book begins with a general overview of basic Buddhist teachings. In fact, the first eight chapters, well over half the book, summarize fundamental Mahāyāna principles as Yeshe contrasts “sutrayana,” a path he criticizes as limited and inferior, to “tantrayana.” Because only the last four chapters treat exclusively tantric subjects, the book would be more appropriately titled *Introduction to Buddhism from a Tantric Perspective*.

In the Spring semester 2013, I incorporated *Introduction to Tantra* into my introductory Buddhism course at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Students read the book at the end of the term as a review of

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Mahāyāna and brief introduction to Vajrayāna Buddhism. After ten weeks of struggling through Peter Harvey's *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), students loved Yeshe's text. In his course evaluation, one student wrote, "Yeshe's book was fantastic. The first eight chapters allowed us to reflect on all the earlier teachings we've already discussed in a new light." Other students described the text as "relatable," "accessible," and "straightforward" and claimed that it "made more sense" than Harvey's. They welcomed the easy-to-read practice book by a "real" Buddhist, and reviewing the basics of Mahāyāna Buddhism boosted their flagging interest and confidence as we concluded the semester.

The first three chapters of *Introduction to Tantra* review content with which my class was comfortably familiar and emphasize aspects of tantric Buddhism that are well-suited to today's undergraduate students. Yeshe speaks directly to college-age Americans' rejection of ascetic practices and their desire for power, speed, and efficiency in the first paragraph of chapter three when he promotes the tantric path: "Instead of advocating separation from worldly pleasures the way many other traditions do, tantra emphasizes that it is much more effective for human beings to enjoy themselves and channel the energy of their enjoyments into a quick and powerful path to fulfillment and enlightenment" (17). Yeshe knew his audience well. Even as he recommends the fast and potent practice of Tantra, Yeshe reminds his readers that the harnessing of desire is not the same as indulgence and warns against falling prey to arrogance and attempting to skip the requisite preliminary practices.

Chapter four, "Overthrowing the Tyranny of Ordinary Appearances," introduces more specifically Tibetan content and is therefore more challenging for beginning students. Yeshe refers to but does not explain, for example, the concept of clear light. Nor does he discuss what he means by the "glorious light body of a deity" or the "essential clarity of our deepest being" (30). His repeated reference to "our essential nature" and our "inner potential" can be misunderstood as reifying per-

sonal identity. In addition, his assertion that, like the multi-armed, multi-faced gods and goddesses one visualizes as part of self-generation practice, the “essence of who [we] are” transcends ordinary appearances demands contextualization so as not to seemingly contradict the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*.

Chapters five through seven provide a fuller explanation than one finds in textbooks of three fundamental Mahāyāna concepts: renunciation, *bodhicitta*, and emptiness. Yeshe’s description of what renunciation does and does not entail is helpful for students who tend to equate renunciation with asceticism. His calling into question the validity of our sense perceptions by comparing them to dream images may strike a chord with empirically-inclined undergrads who trust only what they can see and touch. Also useful in this section is Yeshe’s response to the charge that Mahāyāna-inspired ways of viewing the world as empty and created by the mind are nihilistic. “What we have to understand,” Yeshe writes, “is that things do exist, but not in the concrete way we habitually suppose. The challenge in cultivating the correct view of emptiness is to refute completely all notions of independent self-existence without denying valid interdependent existence” (66).

The real introduction to tantric practice begins with chapter nine on guru yoga and continues through the chapters on the death *bardo* and completion stage practice. From a pedagogical perspective, I found “Inspiration and the Guru” helpful for countering the widespread view that Buddhism, and Asian religions generally, are devoid of objective truth claims, and therefore all interpretations of Buddhist doctrine are equally valid. The “Receiving Initiation” section of the same chapter can be used as a starting point for discussions of the roles of students and instructors in the classroom. Chapter ten’s discussion of death as an opportunity to experience peace effectively challenges students’ claim that thinking about death is depressing.

In addition to the book’s lively and conversational style, several features of the work make it especially suitable for classroom use. First,

in the preface Landaw explains the process by which Yeshe's oral teachings were revised and reformulated by a group of students over the course of several years. The creation of the book, *Introduction to Tantra*, can therefore be compared to the shift from sermons to literary texts that the early Buddhist *sūtras* underwent, a tape-recorder serving as a semi-modern Ānanda. Second, the book utilizes no diacritics and, especially in the first chapters, few foreign-language terms. Instructors can thus utilize the opportunity to have students identify and name important Mahāyāna concepts and schools, such as Buddha-nature and Yogacāra. Finally, the work concludes with a modest glossary and index. Glossary definitions are written with non-specialists in mind yet communicate a substantial amount of information. The entry for *nirvāṇa*, for example, distinguishes between "lower nirvana," a state of self-liberation from suffering, and "higher nirvana," "the supreme attainment of the full enlightenment of buddhahood" (151).

As is the case for many Wisdom publications, *Introduction to Tantra* is not an academic work. Instead, it reads like a self-help or motivational book, replete with concrete analogies to render the world of Buddhist Tantra more familiar to Westerners. Some of Yeshe's attempts to relate to his Western audience, such as equating Avalokiteśvara and Jesus, may miss their mark with conservative Christian students. Other anecdotes, such as the story of Nāropā offering Tilopa a urine-and-sand *maṇḍala*, draw students' attention and may well become themes for the rest of a course. Overall, although I sometimes worried that Yeshe's tone was so casual that students risked missing the profundity of his meaning, at the end of a tough semester, my undergraduates appreciated the ease with which they were able to read and understand a book on Vajrayāna Buddhism written by a highly-respected Tibetan lama.

Note: The differences between the new printing and the 2001 version are minimal: a new cover image, font modifications, an expanded first paragraph in the editor's preface, and several minor deletions. (The entries "Dalai lama," "death," "graded path," and "yidam" have

been omitted from the glossary and some term translations (ex. *prajñā* and *sherab*) and Tibetan language names (ex. Dolma) removed.) The four-page *Selected Additional Reading* section of the 2001 text is also omitted from the new printing. Page numbers and text of the chapters are identical.