



**Charles Manson.** *The Second Karmapa Karma Pakshi: Tibetan Mahasiddha.* Lives of the Masters Series. Boulder: Shambhala, 2022. 304 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55939-467-3.



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**Published on** H-Buddhism (March, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Lucia Galli

The book under review is the ninth volume of Shambhala Publications' Lives of the Masters, a series devoted to the lives of great Buddhist masters, which to date includes six monographs on towering figures in Tibetan Buddhism: Atiśa Dīpaṅkara (982-1054), Maitripa (1007-78?), Rangjung Dorje (Rang 'byung rdo rje, 1284-1339), Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), Gendun Chopel (dGe 'dun chos 'phel, 1903-51), and now Karma Pakshi (1204-83). The titles in this series share two characteristic features: on the one hand, they are meant to be comprehensible to the general reader, and on the other hand, they make extensive use of primary sources. This new contribution to the series subscribes to the standards set by the previous volumes. It deals with a remarkable Tibetan master, is written by a scholar who has long been engaged in the study of his life, and is written in a clear and readable manner.

Karma Pakshi is an exceptional figure in several respects. Tibetan tradition considers him to be the first recognized reincarnated master (Tib. *yang srid*) in its history, a trailblazer whose prac-

tical ways of recognizing the next reincarnation placed him at the origin of several thousands of later lineages based on the recognition of reincarnation. The matter is of course more complex, but the Karmapa lineage is generally considered the oldest of its kind in Tibet. Karma Pakshi was also a promoter of the cult of Avalokiteshvara and the recitation of his heart mantra, which is very much associated with Tibet. Last but not least, Karma Pakshi's life is characterized by his long stay at the court of the Mongol khans, and the book might thus promise to include details concerning an extremely influential center of world events in his time.

That being said, Karma Pakshi's undoubted importance is not reflected in the amount of scholarly literature that has been devoted to him. Not that there is none. For example, Hugh E. Richardson's writings have provided general information on the Karma Kagyu lineage, Matthew Kapstein has covered his scholarly writings, and the process of his reincarnation is the subject of another book by Ruth Gamble, which is dedicated mainly

to his successor, the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje.[1] The most detailed summary of Karma Pakshi's life, however, was, until recently, an article by the author of this book, Charles Manson.[2] One would certainly expect more on such an important figure.

Before actually introducing the contents of the book, I would like to draw attention to one circumstance that increases the value of this publication. Apart from the many existing hagiographies of Karma Pakshi, the memoirs of Karma Pakshi himself, first reproduced and published in Gangtok in 1978, were digitized and made widely available in 2005 by the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to seeking out, preserving, organizing, and disseminating Buddhist literature.[3] Despite being written in cursive script and being therefore difficult to read, these memoirs are one of the main sources used by Manson. With their use, this book moves from a distant view of a holy and extraordinary man to a position representing either how Karma Pakshi perceived himself or, at the very least, how he wanted to present himself.

If one had hoped that such a rare opportunity to use Karma Pakshi's own memoirs would also lead to a detailed description of life in his time or in the Mongolian court, one will probably be disappointed. Karma Pakshi's main focus was clearly on his own mystical visions, which end up shrouding what we might call historical reality. The depth of the visions was clearly more important to him, and in a way more real, than the details of ordinary life.

The book is divided into two parts. While the first part ("Life and Legacy") recounts chronologically Karma Pakshi's apparently very rich life, in the second part ("Writings"), readers have the opportunity to look into the translation of excerpts from Karma Pakshi's texts dealing with crucial themes.

The biographical section is divided into seven chapters devoted to his youth (chapters 1 and 2)

and his teaching (chapters 3 to 5), with very interesting passages describing through autobiographical texts the decade and a half he spent at the court of the Mongol khans. Karma Pakshi first met with Möngke Khan, but when the latter died, Karma Pakshi was imprisoned by Kubilai Khan. Unfortunately, Karma Pakshi's autobiographical texts again tend to describe events in the form of his visions, and so they lack interesting historical details concerning the court of the Mongol khan. His visions and statements are also typically boastful and completely ignore other religious traditions present in the khan's court. The following chapters (chapters 6 and 7) bring the first part of the book to its conclusion, describing Karma Pakshi's return to the Tsurpu monastery, the efforts he devoted to spending the wealth he acquired by building gigantic statues, his encounter with Orgyenpa Rinchen Pel (O rgyan pa rin chen dpal, 1230-1309?), and his death coupled with the discovery of his reincarnation.

In the biographical part, Manson takes great care to identify the sites mentioned in the many biographies of Karma Pakshi, including his autobiography. These texts are often scant of details and present unusual spellings of place names. Although the author, for obvious reasons, uses information mainly from Karma Pakshi's autobiography, he convincingly places this personal text full of visions in a historical context and consults other later hagiographies. Herein also lies the great value of Manson's text.

From time to time there are also interesting references between the lines: for example, the one in which it is described that while at the Mongol court Karma Pakshi "drank the place dry of its store of alcoholic beverages" (p. 68). Although the context mentions tantric initiations, and Manson also speculates on the possibility that the reference regards a drinking fountain created by the Parisian artisan Guillaume Boucher, this reference can also be taken as an innuendo about a warm relationship with drinking. That would not be

strange, as some historical references indicate that the monks of Kadam and later Gelug traditions were usual opponents of drinking, while the relationship to alcohol was relatively loose in other traditions. An example of this is Longchenpa or Longchen Rabjampa (Klong chen rab 'byams pa, 1308-64), the famous meditator and master who received teachings from across schools of Tibetan Buddhism. We do not read about his relationship with alcohol in his biographies, but his poem *Chang gi yon tan bsngags pa* (Celebration of the great qualities of beer) explicitly mentions his fondness for drinking.[4]

As mentioned above, the second part of the book presents the texts of Karma Pakshi. The selection has been made carefully as these texts relate to important events in Karma Pakshi's life and thus represent his own approach to them. However, the reader cannot expect much in the way of open opinions. In particular, his poetry is far from what Western tradition would value as original and self-expressive. For Karma Pakshi, religious texts clearly represent a strong authority and the perception of reality is filtered through them.

Indicative are the long passages in which Karma Pakshi comments on the motivations for building the gigantic statue in Tsurpu. As in many other cases, the impetus for their construction comes from a strong vision. However, here legitimate questions arise after the motivations associated with his stay in the court of the Mongol khans. There were in fact representatives of other religions present, including Muslims known for their prohibition against depicting religious figures, yet Karma Pakshi completely ignores them, and they are mentioned nowhere in his texts. But did this play a role in his obsession for constructing gigantic statues? We learn nothing from the texts themselves and thus such conjectures are relegated to the realm of mere speculation.

In summary, Manson's book dedicated to Karma Pakshi is the most detailed available to date. It is informed by a wealth of difficult textual

sources and years of working with them. The author's writing style is clear and readable, his translations of the texts comprehensible and faithful to the original meaning at the same time. I would like to congratulate the author for this achievement and highly recommend it to interested readers. It is a book of a very high standard and a great contribution to our knowledge of Karma Pakshi's life and legacy.

#### Notes

[1]. Hugh E. Richardson, "The Karma-pa Sect: A Historical Note," in *High Peaks, Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture*, ed. Michael Aris (London: Serindia, 1998), 337-78; Matthew Kapstein, "Religious Syncretism in 13th Century Tibet: The Limitless Ocean Cycle," in *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization: Proceedings of the 1982 Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies Held at Columbia University*, ed. Barbara Nimri Aziz and Matthew Kapstein (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1985), 358-71; and Ruth Gamble, *Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: The Third Karmapa and the Invention of a Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[2]. Charles Manson, "Introduction to the Life of Karma Pakshi (1204/6-1283)," *Bulletin of Tibetology* 45, no. 1 (2009): 25-52.

[3]. Karma Pakshi, *The Autobiographical Writings of the Second Karma-pa Karma-Pakši, and Spyi-lan riñ mo: A Defence of the Bka'-brgyud-pa Teachings Addressed to G'yag-sde Pan-chen* (Gangtok: Gompo Tseten, 1978), BDRC W20877.

[4]. Klong chen rab 'byams pa, "Chang gi yon tan la bsngags pa bdud rtsi zil mngar ma," in *Gsung 'bum dri med 'od zer (sde dge par ma)*, vol. 5, ed. Rdzogs chen mi 'gyur nam mkha'i rdo rje (Sde dge par khang chen mo, 2000), 898-901, BDRC W00EGS1016299.

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**Citation:** Daniel Berounský. Review of Manson, Charles, *The Second Karmapa Karma Pakshi: Tibetan Mahasiddha*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. March, 2023.

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