

Book review of: Daniel A. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born. Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet's Golden Age*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016. Paperback. Wisdom Publications (October 25, 2016) 470 pages, 6 x 9 inches. ISBN 9781614292319.

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The legend of Padmasambhava, the 8th century tantric teacher from *Uddiyāna* (in present day Pakistan), has played a central role in the Tibetan understanding of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet during the Empire period (618-842). The stories of his invitation by Emperor Tri Songdetsen to teach and spread the Dharma in the Tibetan plateau, his role in the founding of Samyé, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, and the extraordinary tales of subjugation of local deities that fought against the success of this new and foreign religion were popularized by the *Copper Island* (*Padma 'byung gnas kyi rnam thar zang gling ma*), a treasure text traditionally considered to have been discovered by the 12th century Tibetan scholar Nyangrel Nyima Öser (1124-92, *Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer*).

Daniel Hirshberg's *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, as its title indicates, is not an attempt at uncovering the historical reality behind the legend of Padmasambhava (for whom we have very little evidence), but a compelling and insightful study of the role that Nyangrel played in the construction of the legend and the cult of Padmasambhava, and its larger implications for Tibetan Buddhism. Hirshberg's book offers a detailed textual analysis of the various recensions of the *Copper Island*, and argues that its traditional label as a treasure (*gter ma*), has ignored Nyangrel's role in its production and dissemination, while also obscuring the complex process "of indigenous innovations that produced the first complete revision of the story of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism at the apogee of the Tibetan empire, with Padmasambhava as its heroic protagonist" (94). Hirshberg convincingly argues that the *Copper Island* should be, instead, considered as "the product of the Tibetan assimilation and transformation of core Indian Buddhist literary traditions and

religious concepts that coalesced in Nyangrel" (95). Hirshberg's work offers much more though since, in the process of examining Nyangrel's role in the construction of Padmasambhava's legend, he also argues for Nyangrel's contributions to the Tibetan understanding of reincarnation, as well as to its role in creating the foundations for the Treasure tradition.

The first chapter ("Karmic Foreshadowing on the Path of Fruition") explores the life of Nyangrel through the lens of the two earliest biographies written about him and also the earliest significant accounts of a Tibetan Treasure revealer, the *Clear Mirror* (*gSal ba'i me long*) and the *Stainless Proclamation* (*Dri ma med pa*), which allows Hirshberg to establish three key defining points of Nyangrel's life: 1) his claim as a reincarnation of the Tibetan Emperor Tri Songdetsen, 2) his self-identification as a treasure revealer, and 3) his role as a central figure in the establishment of the cult and mythology of Padmasambhava, redefining the narrative of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. One of the central tensions of the chapter is Hirshberg's attempts at balancing his methodological understanding of the irretrievable nature of Nyangrel's life, which he accepts is "lost to time" (36) and only preserved in later, secondary accounts while, at the same time, reading these two biographies as providing "insights into who Nyangrel was, his context, and his products." This is not an easy tension to resolve, but Hirshberg's close textual analysis and interpretation of these texts do offer new and important insights about how contemporary scholars should reassess our understanding of such a key figure in the construction of Tibetan Buddhism in the early post-imperial period.

In chapter two ("Reincarnation and the Return of the Sovereign"), Hirshberg explores the central role played by Nyangrel in the unique Tibetan creation of the process of catenate incarnation and, in particular, the Tulku system, since he was among the first Tibetans to claim a continuous and unbroken sequence of prominent Tibetan figures as his predecessors (57) all the way back to the 8th century Emperor Tri Songdetsen. What makes this chapter particularly significant to our modern understanding of reincarnation within the Tibetan Buddhist context is the fact that, as Hirshberg points out, while "reincarnation has become one of the most renowned and definitive aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, yet relatively little has been clarified concerning the Tibetan assimilation and transformation of this prominent Indian concept" (55). Nyangrel made claims only regarding his pre-incarnations, and made no statements or predictions about future incarnations, which situates him as an important historical link between a vague notion of reincarnation in

the Indian Buddhist context that preceded him, and the very concrete, institutionalized and ritualized process of the tulku system that came after him, most famously represented by the Karmapa and Dalai Lama lineages. For Nyangrel, the idea of catenate reincarnation became a central tool in his efforts to legitimize his standing among competing teachers, and Buddhist systems existing in Tibet during his time, by skillfully claiming a direct connection to the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, since Tri Songdetsen was Nyangrel's earliest reincarnation and a direct disciple of Padmasambhava. In the process, he helped redefine the past by introducing a new compelling narrative of the introduction of Buddhism into the Land of Snows around the figure of Padmasambhava.

Chapter three ("Treasure Before Tradition") focuses on Nyangrel's early contributions to the construction of the Tibetan Treasure tradition. Hirshberg here follows Janet Gyatso's understanding of treasures, focusing on how Nyangrel and others presented them as authentic rather than whether or not they are (87). His analysis of the *Copper Island* and the *Essence of Flowers: A History of Buddhism* (*Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*) illuminates Nyangrel's central role in the early development of the Treasure tradition, and argues that Nyangrel not only used the notion of Treasure as a way to legitimize himself ("to reconstruct the shattered relics of his patriarchal and reincarnate inheritance," (139) in the words of Hirshberg), but also as a "method for slipping the yoke of the Tibetan obsession with Indian pedigree and orthodoxy such that a genuinely Tibetan Buddhism, one adapted to the cultural constructs and needs of the Tibetan people, could evolve" (139).

Chapter four ("Drawing Honey From Historiography"), offers a very technical textual analysis of the *Essence of Flowers*, which Hirshberg convincingly argues that may not have been completely written by Nyangrel himself but includes parts that were composed by some of his disciples (174).

Finally, chapter five ("Delivering the Lotus-Born") examines the authorship of the *Copper Island*, and reminds us of its importance for our understanding of Tibetan Buddhism after Nyangrel. The *Copper Island* was the first complete biography of Padmasambhava, it successfully introduced an alternative narrative to the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet while glorifying the Tibetan Imperial era (a very different narrative to that offered, for example, in the earlier *sBa bzhed*), and it also introduced the idea of the Tibetan Emperor Sontsen Gampo as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara, which will become central later on to the portrayal of the Dalai Lamas as divine protectors of Tibet. The chapter also compares the dual roles and fortunes of the *Copper Island*, traditionally considered a treasure, and

the *Essence of Flowers*, a more conventional historical account (*Chos 'byung*) of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. As the treasure tradition became more important in the centuries after Nyangrel's death, the *Copper Island* became a very powerful tool that, as Hirshberg concludes transformed Nyangrel's text into "a truly unique treasure that not only defined his life and legacy but also articulated for the first time an emic history of Tibet's golden age that continues to resonate at the core of Tibetan collective identity to the present" (201).

Although the book can be quite technical in parts, which may reduce his audience to the Tibetan Studies scholarly community, Hirshberg is a compelling writer that seems to have absorbed some of the poetic language so pervasive in the literature he studies ("rather than a march of perfectly distinct ripples, life is more analogous to a vast rainstorm spattering the surface of an endless ocean of awareness," 33). In conclusion, Daniel Hirshberg's *Remembering the Lotus-Born* offers an important contribution to our understanding of one of the most important intellectual figures in the history of Tibet, Nyangrel Nyima Öser, and his critical role in the process of assimilation and transformation of Buddhism in the Tibetan plateau.

