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Book review of 'The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion' by Donatella Rossi

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Donatella Rossi's recent publication on the philosophical view of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs pa chen po*) in the Bon tradition is a welcomed addition to a small but growing body of literature on this important Tibetan religion. Compared with the relatively extensive treatment the Buddhist traditions of Tibet have received from scholars, academic studies of the Bon religion remain few and each new contribution is significant. This study provides a valuable entry way into the often very subtle view of the Bon tradition as expressed in its literature on what it sees as the highest understanding of reality, the Great Perfection.

The Bon religion is the most ancient religious tradition known in Tibet and flourished with royal patronage as the state religion in the pre-literate period before the arrival of Buddhism in the 8th century CE. As a result of various periods of suppression and a virtual Buddhist hegemony in Tibet, the Bon tradition became the religion of a small minority and over time adapted itself in many ways to the dominant tradition. This has happened to such an extent that many have argued that the Bon religion is now simply a fifth school of Tibetan Buddhism. Given the lack of written resources on the Bon tradition from pre-Buddhist Tibet and the clear and powerful influence Buddhism has had on the Bon traditions over the past thirteen hundred years, it seems unlikely we will ever have a clear picture of the tradition and its views before the advent of Buddhism. Rossi is in agreement with Per Kvaerne, probably the leading Western scholar on the Bon religion, when he argues that while philosophical, meditative, and ritual traditions are very similar today and much of the canonical literature is virtually identical with that of Tibet's Buddhist traditions, "Concepts of sacred history and sources of religious authority are, however, radically different and justify the claim of the Bonpos to constitute an entirely distinct religious community" (Kvaerne 1995, p.13, Rossi 1999, p.19).

The contents of Rossi's new book include an extensive introduction covering the first sixty nine pages. The second and third parts include translations and critical editions of two of the most important Bon texts treating the philosophical view of the Great Perfection: *rdzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las rgyud bu chung bcu gnyis bzhugs so* (*The Twelve Little Tantras, from the Zhang Zhung Aural Transmission of the Great Perfection*) and *lta ba seng ge sgra bsgrags bzhugs so* (*The View Which Is Like The Lion's Roar*).

The introduction is divided into sections and begins with some basic background on the history and mythology of the Bon religion. This includes a discussion of its origins, its enjoyment of royal patronage in Tibet, up through the decline of that state support and its eventual "abolishment" during the reign of the king Khri srong lde btsan. Some presentation of the history of the confluence of Bon and Buddhism over the succeeding centuries would have helped to contextualize the subject matter of this study for the non-specialist or those unfamiliar with the unfolding evolution of Bon. While in general her comments are brief and not intended to be exhaustive, this addition would have been beneficial. There is then a brief synopsis of the Great Perfection teachings in Bon which are considered the tradition's highest and most subtle explanations of the state of absolute knowledge and the means by which one attains such a state. Also included in the introduction is a treatment of lineages and textual sources for the Bonpo Great Perfection tradition which Rossi systematically organizes and categorizes for easy reference. This is a very useful outline of the basic components of the Bonpo literature on the Great Perfection. Rossi then proceeds to survey 'Western' (modern) scholarship on the tradition. It is amazing how little work has actually been done on the philosophical view of the Bon tradition or on the Bonpo Great Perfection tradition in general. There was some early work done by David Snellgrove with the assistance of Lupon Tenzin Namdak and a study of the A Khrid lineage, one of the three main Bonpo Great Perfection lineages carried out by Per Kvaerne. Recently Anne Klein has been working with Bonpo Geshe Tenzin Wangyal on some important early philosophical materials composed in a dialectical style. Other than some additional minor works, very little scholarly material on the philosophical view of the Bonpo Great Perfection has come to light in Western languages.

In her brief section on methodology, Rossi addresses the obvious need for comparative work between this tradition and the Great Perfection tradition of the Nying-ma school of Tibetan Buddhism. The similarities exist in the substance of the doctrines as well as the names, but there also exist important differences both in view and in lineage histories. While it was outside the scope and purpose of this work, Rossi stresses the importance of this type of study. She however has rightly confined this study, particularly given the vast body of literature yet to receive scholarly attention, to a "descriptive analysis of the view of the Bonpo Great Perfection." This is an important first step and she carries it out quite successfully.

Rossi's treatment of the philosophical view of the Bonpo Great Perfection tradition which concludes her introduction to this work is a concise and clear exposition, giving the reader a strong sense not only of the view,

its technical terminology, and nuances, but also of the flavor and literary style of the philosophical literature, from which she quotes extensively. The view is one of rigorous non-duality, not entirely dissimilar from the some interpretations of Advaita-Vedānta in this regard and certainly very similar to the Nying-ma school's presentation. One's own Ultimate nature is in reality no different from the perfect enlightened state of the unchanging Great Perfection according to Bonpo sources. The goal or fruit is this natural state. Descriptions of the non-dual nature of the Great Perfection explain that, "it cannot be identified with the state transcending suffering (*nya ngan las 'das pa*) enjoyed by enlightened beings, nor with the state of transmigration (*'khor ba*), since it encompasses and at the same time transcends both" (Rossi, 44). The claim of its lack of inherent existence (*rang bzhin med pa*) resonates with the fundamental tenets of the Madhyamaka school, yet, "it is endowed with a dynamic potential (*rtsal*) whereby it can manifest itself in all sorts of ways" (Rossi, 50) much as is the case in the Nying-ma school's descriptions of the Great Perfection. Rossi sums this up when she writes, "the Pure-and-Perfect-Mind is represented by the state of inseparability or non-duality of unborn emptiness, which is primordially pure, and the unobstructed appearance of phenomena, which is spontaneously accomplished. This principle of non-duality of primordial purity and spontaneous accomplishment is a distinctive feature characterizing the View of the Great Perfection" (Rossi, 56). While I have attempted to give a sense of the view here, it is not possible to do justice to such an important and subtle philosophical position as this in the space of a book review. Rossi's study however is an excellent place to start.

The final two thirds of the book are comprised of translations and critical editions of two important texts to this tradition, *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud las rgyud bu chung bcu gnyis bzhugs so: rdzogs pa chen po byang chub sems kyi gnad byang* (*The Twelve Little Tantras, from the Zhang Zhung Aural Transmission of the Great Perfection: The Great Perfection, The Focal Point of the Pure-and-Perfect-Mind*) and *lTa ba seng ge sgra bsgrags bzhugs so* (*The View Which Is Like The Lion's Roar*). Both are annotated with useful notes and are organized in manner that facilitates ease in use. The translations that lay on the opposite pages of the critical Tibetan editions are both clear and graceful. Rossi remains close to the original Tibetan in her translations with a minimum amount of sacrifice in terms of elegance to the verses she is translating. This is often no simple task as is evident in the many awkward and cumbersome translations from Tibetan which are available these days. Rossi's work here is quite commendable.

The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion illuminates important dark corners in modern research on Tibetan Religion. Hopefully this volume will pave the way for more work in this important area of the history of religions and the history of ideas, and become one of many such studies documenting the ideas and practices of the Tibetan Bon religion.

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Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism

By Todd T. Lewis. Translations in Collaboration with Subarna Man Tuladhar and Labh Ratna Tuladhar. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Pp. xviii + 236, 26 plates, 4 tables.

This book is a work of definite value, since it can be of interest not only to anthropologists who delight themselves in the study of Himalayan cultures, but also, if not more importantly, to those who make the research, study [and nowadays even practice] of Buddhism their major occupation.

The reason is spelled out by Todd T. Lewis in the Preface (p. xiv), where he offers an "at a glance" historical survey of Buddhist scholarship, and affirms that "[s]cholarship on Buddhism has been dominated either by philological-textual studies that usually have left texts unrelated to their community context(s) or by ethnographic studies that have often neglected local literati and their domesticated vernacular literatures."

Scholarly study of Buddhism in the West has certainly shown an initial preference for philological investigation. However, this is quite understandable, because the conditions for pursuing field work and having access to knowledgeable informants were not so widely available a few decades ago as they may be nowadays, and textual sources have been, and in some cases still are, the only tools available to pursue research; I think as a way of phenomenological comparison to the numerous Tibetan Bonpo texts containing narratives and rituals that still remain virtually unknown and unedited. On the other hand, I agree that if the crucial aspect of textual domestication—which constitutes a primary concern in Lewis' research—is overlooked, the result can be a