

Book review - As Long as Space Endures

Essays on the Kalacakra Tantra in Honor of H.H. the Dalai Lama

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This publication is a landmark in the history of modern Kalacakra scholarship, and as such provides an opportunity to assess how far we have come in bringing the Kalacakra tradition into contemporary culture.

One of the most inspiring aspects of the book is the diversity among the 25 contributions it includes. Of the 21 about Kalacakra, eight or nine are based on translation from Sanskrit sources, whilst the rest originate from Tibetan sources. The latter include commentaries by three contemporary Tibetan lamas. Three of the articles relate to the Jonang tradition. It is fortunate that we now have authentic, direct access to this precious Kalacakra tradition. Four essays relate Kalacakra to modern science. Seven or eight articles relate directly to practice of Kalacakra. In terms of research into early Kalacakra sources, it is pleasing that all three of the 'Bodhisattva commentaries' are represented¹ as is the *Sekoddesa* and Naropa's commentary on it. Of the necessarily small selection of Tibetan works discussed, it is good to see the Second Dalai Lama's commentary on the *Manjushrinamasamgiti* included. That the first contribution is a full translation of the *Manjushrinamasamgiti* by Alex Berzin makes for an auspicious beginning. That the final three contributions are edited transcripts of teachings on Kalacakra by contemporary masters, Geshe Drakpa Gelek, Jhado Rinpoche and Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoche underlines that the lineages of initiation, instruction and practice are very much still alive. Four of the essays that are not directly about Kalacakra, help elucidate aspects of Kalacakra knowledge.

The article *The Influence of the Kalacakra: Vajrapani on Consort Meditation* opens with the confident historicist assertion, 'The *Kalacakratantra* was the last of the major tantras to be composed in India.' However, few other contributions challenge or discuss the traditional historical presentation and chronology of the Shambhala connection and the emergence of the tantra in India, since other contributors appear not to need to take a stance on this issue. Moreover, the credibility granted to the science of the Kalacakra system by Vesna Wallace, Joseph Loizzo and Ivette Vargas demonstrates how contemporary post-modern scholarship may unapologetically manage a blend of traditional and modern perspectives on this ancient tradition. Thus the book as a whole transcends modern historicist attitudes towards the tradition, without descending into patronisation or cliché. Without dismissing any aspect of the tradition, there is a notable absence of Shangri-la mythologizing. The respect shown to the three Tibetan lamas by ending the book with their teachings does not devalue the exposition of internalised fruits of practice in non-Tibetan contributors such as Sofia Stril-Rever. The collection as a whole showcases the achievements in Kalacakra scholarship and practice by a wide range of present-day contributors. In short the tradition is alive and developing. It has survived the Chinese invasion of Tibet both within and outside Tibet. Thus, the publication of this

¹ The Bodhisattva Commentaries are important early Kalacakra commentaries

book serves as a declaration of optimism about the future of the Kalacakra tradition, and the enlightened culture of diversity it initiates wherever it takes root.

Some contributions are more focused than others on the question of the role of Kalacakra culture. Robert Thurman has keenly captured this aspect of the collection in his foreword, where having inspiringly equated the Kalacakra with the embodiment of bodhicitta, he leads on to say:

So here we are in these times of seemingly endless human violence, confusion, needless destruction of the environment, and even self-destruction of whole societies. We are caught in the poisonous of unrealistic worldviews, especially those of nihilistic science that robs our breath of meaning and our steps of purpose. It is thousands of years past the most recent World Buddha's manifest historical engagement with us, and everything seems to get worse and worse. But who shows up for us? Our Precious Teacher, our Ocean Guru. He constantly and tirelessly renews for us the pledge of Shakyamuni, his exquisite demonstration that he will never abandon any of us to our wretched fate – the art of Kalachakra, the Wheel of Time.

And of the book itself:

May it please not only His Holiness but also all people who are interested in a positive world...where everyone...can live in peace, enjoy their hard-earned human lifetime, and seek its essential potential by educating him- or herself in all the arts of wisdom, kindness, love, and joy! (p xii)

This vision of Kalacakra as the basis for a positive world civilisation rolls out as one reads the book from cover to cover. In particular, I would like to focus on *Kalacakra and the Nalanda Tradition: Science, Religion, and Objectivity in Buddhism and the West* by Joseph Loizzo, M.D., Ph.D. Loizzo, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Cornell University and visiting scholar of religion at Columbia University, skilfully leads us towards his 'Global Vision for Sustainable Science and Education'. This final (third) section of his essay presents a curriculum for the future, grounded in Kalacakra, but cleverly mapped against the entire spectrum of modern behavioural and analytic therapeutic sciences together with the spectrum of all three vehicles of the Buddha's teaching and also Indian Vedist yoga and philosophy.

He bases his vision on the 'Nalanda Tradition of Multidisciplinary Human Science' of which he calls Kalacakra the 'time-capsule'. These understandings are discussed in the first two sections of the essay. The connection between the three sections is summarised by Loizzo as follows:

The Kalacakra tradition is no idle prophecy, but an eminently reasoned and pragmatic plan for a sustainable global future for humanity, based on a decisive commitment to progressive, democratic forms of science and civilisation. While the legend and teaching of the wheel of Time has seemed to many shrouded in an

exotic air of magic and mystery, it is as far from the romantic lore of myth and legend as our own European tradition of enlightenment. This may not be as incredible as it sounds when we consider the fact that, like our enlightenment vision of science and democracy, the Kalacakra vision is grounded in the most mainstream institution of contemplative life: the university. The fact that the emergence of the Wheel of Time preceded our scientific enlightenment by at least a millennium is not so shocking when one considers that the first Indian universities, Takshashila, Dhanyakataka, and Nalanda were founded a millennium or more before the first western universities at Bologna, Paris, and Oxford. More surprising is the fact that the basic elements of the scientific worldview of the Kalacakra anticipate not just the modern physics of Newton or modern biology of Freud, but also the postmodern insights of Einstein, Heisenberg, Wittgenstein, and Lacan. As if that were not enough, the timeless contemplative science of the Wheel of Time presents us with the futuristic promise of fully adapting our experiences of ourselves and our world to the new realities of quantum physics, neural plasticity, and positive psychology, of which many have not yet heard. (pp 359-360)

Loizzo's vision is perhaps the high-point of the collection in terms of breadth of vision, but it explicitly depends on the work of Vesna Wallace, who has also contributed two essays to this book. One in particular, *The Body as a Text and the Text as the Body: a view from the Kalacakra's Perspective* signals a new phase in Kalacakra scholarship, where a contemporary scholar, who as we know, from her previous translations and commentaries on the tantra and the great commentary, to be deeply rooted in the Sanskrit sources, opens up a radically challenging and profoundly inspiring perspective on Kalacakra practice. Anyone who has practised the Kalacakra sadhana, in particular the full body, speech and mind mandala sadhana will know how fundamental is the Sanskrit alphabet to the Kalacakra process of deconstruction of ordinary reality and its replacement by transcendent reality. Practitioners will also be familiar with the succession of series of six that form the base, path and result of Kalacakra practice. This essay presents a theoretical perspective on this process that provides a contemporary practice commentary that is not a reiteration of Tibetan forms of practice commentary.

For a taste of this most interesting essay:

In the final phase of revision, the embodied text is completely transformed with the incineration of all of its letters by the fire of that same gnosis that previously linked them together. Following the model of the six-phased composition, dissolution and reconstruction of the text's two earlier forms – phenomenal and conceptual – the process of its incineration is also carried out in six consecutive phases. This new text, which is devoid of parts and signs (*nimitta*), is said to have a unique nonconceptual form, characterised by nonpronounceable consonants and vowels. It is reduced to the single syllable *a*. As such, it is likened to formless, nonembodied (*arupa*) space and is characterised as inexplicable (*anirdesya*) and ungrounded (*apratistha*) in anything.

On account of being reduced to the single letter, it transcends the subject-object duality, and is thereby self-cognisant in the sense that it is an indivisible union of the discourse, its subject matter, and the author. In contrast, the embodied, conceptual text, consisting of many letters, exists as an object of knowledge in relation to the reader as its subject. (p 187)

Practitioners will recognise a new way of discussing the familiar processes of Kalacakra yoga via the central metaphor of the text. The title of the essay indicates the link between text and body that Wallace wants us to understand.

The editor, Edward Arnold has divided the essays into three groups, 'Translation and Revelation', 'Analysis and Insight' and 'Transmission and Transition'. In all honesty this does not work for me. I can see that some of the translations are in the first section, and that the final section has some essays that could be about transition of the tradition to the future, and others that transmit traditional teachings. Beyond some sort of loose association with the three titles, I cannot recognise the categories. Moreover, I was a little challenged by the order of the essays, as I read the book from cover to cover. The first section is quite hard going, containing as it does, some of the more obscure texts of the tradition. I did wonder whether there might have been a more reader-friendly order that would have led on gradually into the more difficult areas.

Opening with the full text of the *Manjushrinamasamgiti* is appropriate to the intention of the book to honour His Holiness. Incidentally, the edited transcript of His Holiness' commentary prepared by Phil Lecso is available from the IKN website. There is a historical logic to following this with three further translations from early Kalacakra sources, but it is not clear to me why the first section closes with Kilty's translation of a commentary on the structure of the subtle body, particularly when the major contribution on the Six-branched Yoga of the book (by Edward Henning) is in the next section. I won't go on. In a sense it would be impossible to contrive a logical order for this diverse collection of essays. Edward Arnold has created a sequence that makes sense for him, and the rest of us can read the essays in any order we choose.

Finally I would like to single out another personal favourite, Reigle's *Sanskrit Mantras in the Kalacakra Sadhana*. In my opinion, David Reigle is a special scholar of Kalacakra. Like his other published works, this one reads as if he is talking to you. It is at once relaxed and authoritative, because he is both sure of his ground, and seemingly not motivated by personal ambition. You don't feel he is trying to sell you something. Like several of the contributors, he is a scholar-translator-practitioner. This is an important point, and must be hard work for him, but the spin-off for the tradition is that the products of this activity are neither overly-theoretical nor lacking in academic rigour. Reigle's essay is above all practical, and seems to be aimed primarily at the practitioner, though I am confident that it will also be valued by translators and academics as a useful reference and context-setter.

Because his essay is focused on the use of Sanskrit mantras it connects indirectly to Wallace's essay on the relationship between text and body. Reigle is somewhat more prosaic, but his essay reads like a teaching for practitioners:

When everything has been dissolved into emptiness, the visualizations of the sadhana proper can begin. These are done from seed-syllables, or *bija*-mantras...From emptiness emerge the *bija*-mantras or seed-syllables, and from these are generated the mandala, i.e. the residence, and the deities who inhabit it. After these are visualized there follows a key step. The deities whom you have visualized are, at this point, your thought constructions, imagined deities called "pledge beings" (*samaya-sattva*). You now call in the real deities...Next the invited primordial wisdom beings or real deities are caused to enter (*pravesana*) the pledge beings...The deities (*devata*, literally, "shining one-ness, or -hood) called primordial wisdom beings (*jnana-sattvas*) are described in the texts as the "purities" (*visuddhi*) of specific elements of our world...Understanding what these are helps us to understand the deity called Vajrasattva, the "diamond being," i.e., the ultimate nature of a being. There are the imagined *samaya-sattvas*, or pledge beings, the "real" *jnana-sattvas*, or primordial wisdom beings, and just plain *sattvas*, ordinary beings such as ourselves. Vajrasattva, as the vajra or ultimate nature of a being, is then, in a certain sense, the ultimate nature of our very selves. But this diamond nature is that of a Buddha... (Pp 306-8)

I have selectively quoted odd lines from Reigle's essay in order to show the thread he follows, gently leading us towards the essence or ultimate nature. His structure is beguilingly simple, but between each of these markers is a wealth of detailed information about the processes and the mantras that underpin them. The essay demonstrates through the lens of practice of the sadhana, how the mantras themselves lie at the root of the ordinary and pure as well as the transformational process.

Actually, Reigle's essay serves as a blueprint for the whole book, through which the entire Kalacakra system within the contemporary world is manifested for the reader who can make the links and connections. Such a reader needs to be both scholar and practitioner. Thanks to the great translators whose names adorn this book, this system and its living traditions are now available to those of us who do not know Sanskrit or Tibetan. Although Kalacakra can be of immense benefit to the modern world way beyond those who know the system, it can only be utilised for the benefit of the world by one who is both a practitioner and a scholar. I am confident that His Holiness is appropriately honoured by such a book that brings these strands together. I am deeply grateful to all those who have made this book possible, for sharing their work and knowledge with us.

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