

Introducing Tibetan Buddhism

by Geoffrey Samuel.

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Reviewed by Georgios T. Halkias

Geoffrey Samuel, the author of numerous publications on Tibetan culture, including *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (1993) and the translation from German and Italian of Tucci's authoritative work, *The Religions of Tibet* (1980), is well up to the task of offering a knowledgeable and instructive introduction to Tibetan Buddhism for the Routledge World Religions Book Series. His present work is carefully arranged in twelve chapters that stand as independent units, though material is often taken up again in other sections, aiding students by revisiting topics previously covered. There is also a useful chronology of important dates and events, an appendix that serves as a tantalising sample of some important Tibetan lamas and their lineages, a glossary of the key Sanskrit and Tibetan terms mentioned (in phonetic rendition), and a substantial index at the end of the book.

The first two chapters, 'Background' and 'The development of Buddhism in Tibet', provide the reader with a good sense of the historical vicissitudes that led to the foundation and development of all the major Tibetan schools of Buddhism. Chapters Three and Four are dedicated to the clarification of some fundamental soteriological aspects of Buddhism from the textual perspective of sutras and tantras, and their fusion in the Tibetan arrangement of the union of the three vehicles. It is the hope of this reviewer that future introductions on Tibetan Buddhism will address the religious and political importance of Sukhavati (*bde ba can*) traditions for the formation and identity of Tibetan Buddhism, where we find a unique synthesis between esoteric and exoteric traditions and interpretations of Pure Land ideology not found elsewhere in Asia (for a pertinent bibliography see Halkias 2012, Kapstein 2003, Schwiieger 1978, and Skorupski 1995). The remaining chapters are innovative and refreshing, as they furnish us with information usually absent in most standard introductions to this subject. An anthropological interpretation

of the material throughout the book and an emphasis on current events reflects the author's expertise and offers an up to date perspective on the application and interpretation of Buddhism in Tibetan contexts.

Chapters Five ('Tibetan Buddhism as a system of knowledge'), Seven ('Lamas and other religious practitioners'), Eight ('Tibetan Buddhism as Practical Religion'), Nine ('Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan identity'), Ten ('Tibetan Buddhism, women and gender'), Eleven ('The Bon religion of Tibet: pre-Buddhist survival or variant form of Buddhism') and Twelve ('Tibetan Buddhism today and tomorrow') are especially illuminating in this respect, providing a more grounded approach to the subject of Tibetan religiosity in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular. For example, in the ninth chapter, the author delves into an insightful narrative of earlier Tibetan notions that held the natural landscape as sacred, imbued with spirits and deities, and examines how these conceptions reverberated with Buddhist ascetics and pilgrimage sites that reinforced a Tibetan tradition of identification with locality and perpetuated kin and clan-based social orders. Maintaining good relations with the surrounding local gods and spirits is integral to Tibetan society and practical concerns of this nature spill into a variety of religious sentiments that find expression in human oracles, divination techniques and rituals which are often managed by Buddhist specialists (chapter eight). This said, the last chapter, which deals with the revival of Buddhism in the post-Mao era, called by some the 'later diffusion' (*yang-dar*) of Buddhism, is rather frugal in its treatment of the topic and suggested bibliography, especially in respect to the development and transformation of Tibetan Buddhism in the West (for useful readings on this topic see Coleman 2001, Lopez 1998, Prebish & Baumann 2002, and Prebish & Tanaka 1998).

As with other introductory works of this kind, certain limitations are to be expected. Nevertheless, the author has succeeded in striking an admirable balance between simplification on the one hand and expert treatment on the other, with the section on 'Discussion Questions' leaning towards the former and the suggestions for 'Further Reading' at the end of each chapter toward the latter. I have my reservations as to the usefulness of rendering all Tibetan terms phonetically to the exclusion of the more cumbersome (but faithful to spelling and meaning) Wylie system of transliteration, not so much for privileging an approximation of the Lhasa dialect, but for failing to prepare students to read more specialised

literature and to inspire them to learn to read Tibetan as they would need to when approaching other major languages of Buddhism, like Sanskrit, Pāli and Chinese. The poor black and white reproduction of an otherwise instructive selection of images chosen by the author is a major drawback of the Routledge series, as is the lack of a comprehensive bibliography of all works cited at the end of the book. Nevertheless, Samuel's *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism* is one of the best available introductions of Tibetan Buddhism on the market and a recommended textbook for teachers and students of Asian religions.

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