

**Deroche, Marc-Henri, *Une Quête tibétaine de la sagesse: Prajñāraśmi (1518-1584) et l'attitude impartiale (ris med)*, Brepols, 2023, 724 pages.**

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**D**arc-Henri Deroche's *Une Quête tibétaine de la sagesse: Prajñāraśmi (1518-1584) et l'attitude impartiale (ris med)* developed from his 2011 doctoral thesis from the École Pratique des Hautes Études. But this is more than a dissertation book; Deroche has synthesized an impressive amount of new material and scholarship in the intervening twelve years, including the publication of new writings of Prajñāraśmi in 2016 and the discovery of relevant artwork in 2019. Some readers might be more familiar with the titular subject by his Tibetan name Shes rab 'od zer, but Deroche opts for the Sanskrit semantic equivalent on the fair grounds that this is what Prajñāraśmi himself preferred (p. 37). Deroche is to be commended for writing the definitive academic study of Prajñāraśmi. *Une Quête tibétaine de la sagesse* is a 724-page tome that gives an encyclopedic overview of Prajñāraśmi's life, political context, and, especially, intellectual and religious influence, and so will be of use to a much wider range of scholars than its title might suggest, including historians of sixteenth-century Tibet, Tibetan philosophy and intellectual history, the Fifth Dalai Lama, and ris med, although each group of scholars might benefit from utilizing individual sections of the work rather than reading it cover to cover. The book's ten chapters are divided into three parts: L'Homme, L'Œuvre, and L'Heritage. I will treat each in turn.

Part One, "L'Homme," provides a general introduction to Prajñāraśmi, also known as Trengpo Tertön Sherab Özer ('Phreng po gter ston shes rab 'od zer), and thoroughly situates him within his religio-political milieu. Much of Part One shows how Prajñāraśmi's life responded to and was conditioned by the various overlapping political systems into which he had been thrust. Prajñāraśmi was a syncretic teacher and practitioner, initially trained as an adolescent in the Gelug and Sakya schools before ultimately becoming more attracted to Nyingma and Kagyu visions of contemplative practice (p. 85-86). This was despite, or perhaps because of, being born during a time of intense sectarianism, when the various Tibetan Buddhist schools were broadly aligned with competing political interests. For instance, in Prajñāraśmi's lifetime, Gelugpas were banned from the Great Prayer Festival (Smon lam chen mo), which was instead given

over to Karma Kagyu monks. The edict was informed less by purely doctrinal disputes than by the Rin spungs pa desire to publicly demonstrate their consolidation of political power (p. 89). In addition to straddling many different schools, Deroche also observes that Prajñāraśmi is one of few figures in Tibetan history to have been trained as both a dge bshes and a gter ston. Hence, Deroche argues compellingly that the life of Prajñāraśmi can tell us a great deal about a wide swath of Tibetan political and religious life during the sixteenth century.

Prajñāraśmi took lay vows with the master Tshul khriims 'od zer ba (dates unknown) as a child, and began practicing at E wam Monastery, where he received the name Shes rab 'od zer: "Light of Wisdom." When he was eighteen, he left E wam to follow 'Bri gung rin chen phun tshogs (1509-1557), a senior abbot of the Drigung Kagyu lineage, from whom Prajñāraśmi received both Nyingma and Kagyu teachings. 'Bri gung rin chen phun tshogs was an important gter ston, and, after spending ten years as a hermit, Prajñāraśmi himself received and revealed many important treasures from Padmasambhava, namely the *Sphere of Liberation: Natural Liberation of Intention (Grol thig dgongs pa rang grol)*. Chapter Three, "Activités Et Transmission (p. 123)," provides a comprehensive account of his transmissions and teachings given and received, as well as an overview of his most prominent disciples (p. 138). After a period of revealing treasures across Bsam yas and important monasteries of Tibet, he settled in 'Phreng po, hence the honorific title by which he became known. Prajñāraśmi founded Dpal ri Monastery in 1571 (p. 129), which he led until his own death in 1584. The monastery was decimated by the Dzungars in 1717 and again during the Cultural Revolution.

Part Two, "L'œuvre de Prajñāraśmi," provides an analysis of Prajñāraśmi's works based on four sources: (1) Most importantly, his gsung 'bum; (2) writings found in collections by other authors, including the treasures compiled in the *Sphere of Liberation*; (3) two texts uncovered by Deroche during his field research at Dpal ri Monastery collected under the single title *Aspirational Sūtras and Mantras (Mdo sngags smon lam)*, which were commented upon by 'Jigs med gling pa (1729/30-1798) and 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820-1892); and (4) a new edition of his gsung 'bum published in 2016 that includes some of the texts mentioned above that were excluded from the original gsung 'bum (p. 147). Prajñāraśmi wrote in a number of genres, including doxographical history, precepts for awakening bodhicitta, Madhyamaka philosophy, songs of realization (glu), monastic charters (gra tshang gi bca' yig), ritual texts, and short autobiographies (rang nam) composed for the edification of his disciples (p. 149). A lengthy section provides a critical evaluation of the new

gsung 'bum, giving an overview of its contents and evaluating the likelihood that particular works and manuscripts were authored by Prajñāraśmi himself (p. 150). Deroche focuses especially on texts that that would prove influential to later thinkers. For instance, a useful table (p. 158) shows how the contents of Prajñāraśmi's *grol thig treasures* changed as they were transmitted by 'Jigs med gling pa, Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, and Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899).

Chapter Four offers a historical overview and analysis of Prajñāraśmi's oeuvre, while the subsequent three chapters each provide translations of specific texts. Each translation consults multiple witnesses when possible and is accompanied by variant readings and extensive footnotes. Chapter Five turns to Prajñāraśmi's development, or even invention, of the Tibetan doxography of the eight lineages (which in the relevant texts includes the Rnying ma pa, Bka' gdams pa, Shangs pa bka' brgyud, Lam 'bras, Mar pa bka' brgyud, Zhi byed, Sbyor drug, and Rdo rje gsum gyi bsnyen sgrub) (p. 200), which is meant to provide a comprehensive historiography of the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet. Deroche provides a complete translation of Prajñāraśmi's *Ambrosia of Study and Reflection* (p. 219-242) and the first chapter of his *Ambrosia of Meditation* (p. 243-294), as these texts were the subject of a commentary by Mkhyen brtse that would come to serve as "la base de la rédaction du catalogue du Trésor des instructions spirituelles rédigé par Kong sprul (p. 173)," and hence were very influential on what later came to be known as the ris med movement.

Chapter Six turns to *The Lamp Which Illuminates the Two Truths* (*Bden gnyis gsal ba'i sgron me*), which was attributed to Prajñāraśmi and so became an important part of his legacy, even though Deroche argues against Prajñāraśmi's authorship. Instead, Deroche credits Thierry Lamouroux with discerning that the work was actually written by the Kadampa author Lce gsom shes rab rdo rje (1140/1150-1220). Deroche justifies the inclusion of the translation by writing, "Dans la mesure où ce texte est toujours utilisé dans l'exégèse vivante de la tradition rnying ma pa en tant qu'un écrit de Prajñārasmi et que son usage éclaire un autre aspect de la stratégie conservatrice d'union sacrée des anciennes traditions décrite dans le chapitre cinq, nous avons décidé de le garder dans ce travail comme un élément majeur de l'œuvre de Prajñāraśmi, non comme l'une de ses créations originales, mais comme un emprunt significatif et un support essentiel de son enseignement (p. 299)." A critical translation is then provided (p. 324-348). Chapter Seven gives an overview of two texts published under the title *Aspirational Sūtras and Mantras* (*Mdo sngags smon lam*): *The Tree of Happiness: Aspiring toward the Conduct of a Bodhisattva*

(*Byang chub spyod pa'i smon lam phan bde'i ljon pa*), which discusses the sutra path, and *The Feast that Fulfills All Wishes* (*Gsang ba sngags kyi smon lam 'dod 'jo'i dga' ston*), which discusses the tantric path (p. 349). Deroche says that these were the only texts attributed to Prajñāraśmi that were still actively incorporated into the daily liturgy of Dpal ri when he was conducting fieldwork there in 2010. Both texts are then translated (p. 356-382).

Part III, *L'Héritage*, demonstrates the importance of Prajñāraśmi's life and thought to both his own day and to posterity. Chapter Eight argues that the importance of Dpal ri as a Nyingma monastic center has been obscured due to its untimely destruction at the hands of the Dzungars in 1717, even though "il forma en réalité la première grande institution monastique rnying ma au Tibet central (p. 385)," with over three-thousand monastics and other practitioners at its height. The chapter offers a study of the monastery based on 'Jigs med gling pa's account of Dpal ri (*Dpal ri theg pa chen po'i gling gi gtam rdo rje sgra ma'i rgyud mngas*), which has often been mentioned by other scholars but until now had not been the subject of a dedicated study, supplemented by the account in the *Rdzogs chen chos 'byung*. The chapter gives a full accounting of the important texts, artworks, and material objects housed within the monastery.

Chapter Nine is effectively a bridge chapter connecting Prajñāraśmi and Dpal ri to the nineteenth-century "ris med movement" that Deroche wishes to explore at length. The chapter shows Prajñāraśmi's influence on the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) and 'Jigs med gling pa during a period of "Nyingma Renaissance." Deroche shows how the Fifth Dalai Lama utilized Dpal ri's treasure tradition to place himself in the lineage of Za hor, and thereby Padmasambhava and the early Tibetan emperors, providing a Tibetan-centric narrativization of the Gelug political consolidation of central Tibet through Mongol armies. The chapter proceeds to show how 'Jigs med gling pa benefitted from and advanced this Nyingma Renaissance. Even though Deroche concedes that Prajñāraśmi influenced both figures somewhat indirectly, the chapter demonstrates convincingly that Prajñāraśmi's influence extended far beyond the decline of Dpal ri.

Chapter Ten provides a general overview of the socio-political conditions that cultivated the eventual ris med movement, especially the pluralistic orientation of Derge, in eastern Tibet, relative to the Gelug hegemony of central Tibet. Deroche follows recent scholarship in qualifying Gene Smith's description of a "ris med movement," writing that the phrase describes "sinon un activisme, du moins une intense activité religieuse caractérisée par une production littéraire de grande ampleur (p. 428)." Deroche argues that we can draw a direct line from Prajñāraśmi to the great anthologizing projects of Mkhyen

brtse and Kong sprul via 'Jigs med gling pa, particularly with respect to the ris med movement's use of the eight lineages as an organizing doxography. Deroche writes, "Il existe effectivement, selon la tradition, une continuité essentielle entre 'Jigs med gling pa et le mouvement impartial: 'Jam dbyangs Mkhyen bre'i dbang po, le visionnaire d'où le mouvement prit sa source, était considéré comme le Corps d'émanation de 'Jigs med gling pa. Mkhyen brtse donna forme à son éclectisme à travers le modèle des huit lignées de Prajñārasmi dont il avait collecté les œuvres lors de sa visite de Dpal ri (p. 426)." Although this is not necessarily a controversial opinion within ris med scholarship, it might surprise some readers to hear Deroche argue, "En plaçant la transmission du modèle des huit lignées (de Prajñārasmi à Mkhyen brtse, et de Mkhyen brtse à Kong sprul) au centre de notre analyse, nous argumenterons ici que Mkhyen brtse fut davantage l'inspirateur du mouvement et Kong sprul son compilateur. L'éclectisme de Mkhyen brtse se réalisa à travers ses pèlerinages, les collections de nombreuses lignées et la richesse de ses visions. Kong sprul eut le principal rôle d'organiser et de compiler un grand nombre de ces éléments (p. 432)." In addition to their use of the eight lineages, Mkhyen brtse identified Kong sprul as a rebirth of Prajñārasmi, and many of Prajñārasmi's writings, including the *Sphere of Liberation*, were included in Kongtrul's anthologies. This in turn extended Prajñārasmi's influence into the present day vis-à-vis the importance of Kong sprul and Mkhyen brtse to contemporary Tibetan thought. As Deroche writes, "Après Mkhyen brtse et Kong sprul, le modèle des huit lignées de Prajñārasmi est devenu chez leurs nombreux héritiers la présentation classique pour exposer de façon impartiale les traditions du bouddhisme au Tibet (p. 456)." Deroche concludes the section and the book with a summary of Prajñārasmi's influence, writing, "Si jadis Prajñārasmi fut pris entre les Rouges et les Jaunes, son héritage lui survécut donc à la fois au sein du système des Dalai-Lamas et du mouvement impartial, avec comme point commun le rattachement à Padmasambhava, la mémoire de l'ancien Empire et la sacralisation des espaces du monde tibétain par la redécouverte continue des trésors matériels selon une géographie sacrée, une vie visionnaire et une intense activité rituelle (469)."

As I hope the above summary has indicated, Deroche's book is so full of detailed source-work and analysis that almost any scholar of Tibetan Buddhism will find something relevant to their research, even if they don't have any interest in Prajñārasmi per se. Of the book's many strengths, I would like to call attention to three:

First, and perhaps most importantly, this is the definitive book on the life of Prajñārasmi for this generation, though it will hopefully

inspire further studies on this important thinker. Deroche shows Prajñārasmi's significant but unheralded importance to a variety of philosophical and practice lineages, including those transmitted through the Fifth Dalai Lama, 'Jigs med gling pa, and the nineteenth-century ris med masters. Deroche supports his argument with an incredibly wide variety of sources, many of which are analyzed in considerable detail for the first time in western scholarship.

Second, the translations provided in Part II are extremely careful and could have been published as standalone articles or even a short book in themselves. The depth of Deroche's source-work and footnotes is genuinely impressive.

Third, the encyclopedic breadth of the book makes it as valuable to historians of the sixteenth century as to scholars specifically interested in Prajñārasmi. The focus on Prajñārasmi provides a snapshot of Tibetan religious life and thought shortly prior to the Gelug consolidation of political power, and Deroche's work will hence prove useful to historians of a variety of time periods, whether as a cap to pre-Dga' ldan pho brang Tibet, or as a way of framing the Gelug ascendancy from a non-Gelug (but not necessarily polemical or oppositional) perspective (see p. 467-468).

There are, naturally, a few drawbacks that inevitably accompany the publication of such a large tome. The tradeoff of including such a wide breadth of texts and context related to Prajñārasmi's life and work is that the book as a whole at times seems to lack a single argument or claim, even as individual sections are narrowly focused and tightly argued. What's more, the connection between Prajñārasmi's thought and his political context could be theorized in more detail given the effort put into establishing each component. Deroche shows convincingly that philosophical debates and political power were inextricably linked in sixteenth-century Tibet (and beyond), but the relationship between the two could have been more extensively theorized. At times, Deroche follows Dreyfus in arguing that, "la victoire dans le débat scolastique eut souvent pour enjeu le prestige et la supériorité d'une école (p. 181)," but other times it seems like Deroche is suggesting that philosophical positions were mere proxies for various political factions. I imagine that Deroche would say the relationship between the two is not unidirectional, but it would have been nice to see this point theorized a bit more explicitly, though it is possible I am projecting my own interests onto a project with different concerns.

In any case, this is a minor critique of a gargantuan undertaking that was over a decade in the making, one for which Deroche deserves high praise. Although *Une Quête tibétaine de la sagesse* is too technical to be of use to anyone outside of Tibetan Studies, it will

likely benefit almost all scholars consulting this journal, including scholars of Sherab Ozer, not to mention historians of the sixteenth century in Tibet, Tibetan intellectual and political history writ large, and ris med. This volume should provide Deroche with a firm textual and historical foundation for many future projects, which we are eagerly anticipating.

