



The Second Karmapa Karma Pakshi: Tibetan Mahāsiddha

Charles Manson. Shambala: Boulder, CO. 2022. 288 pp. \$27.95 (USD). ISBN: 978-1-5593-9467-3

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Rev. of *The Second Karmapa Karma Pakshi: Tibetan Mahāsiddha*.
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Charles Manson's *The Second Karmapa Pakshi: Tibetan Mahāsiddha*, forms a long overdue, comprehensive introduction to the life, teachings, and writings of one of the central figures in Tibetan Buddhism, and a seminal figure in the Kagyu Lineage. This school of Tibetan Buddhism consists, historically, of Karma Kagyu, the main group within the Kagyu tradition, but also consisting of the Drikung Kagya, the Drukpa lineage, and the Taklong Kagyu. This lineage contains some of the most eminent figures in Tibetan Buddhism, including Naropa, Milarepa, and Maitripa, dating from the first century of the second millennia CE in India, and then Tibet, though preceded several centuries by significant figures in Tantric Buddhism such as Padmasambhāva in the eight-century CE.

As part of the series *Lives of the Masters*, editor Kurtis Schaeffer outlines the function of these introductory texts:

The Lives of the Masters series offers lively and reliable introductions to the lives, works, and legacies of key Buddhist teachers, philosophers, contemplatives, and writers. Each volume in the Lives series tells the story of an innovator who embodied the ideals of Buddhism, crafted a dynamic living tradition during his or her lifetime, and bequeathed a vibrant legacy of knowledge and practice to future generations...¹

As a biographer of Karma Pakshi, Manson is well qualified. He currently serves as a Senior Teaching Fellow at SOAS London, and as librarian for the Tibetan collection at the Bodleian Library (Oxford University). Manson previously spent several years as a Buddhist monk, then later gained a Masters in Theological Studies from the Harvard.

Manson previously assayed Karma Pakshi's life, albeit in a much-abbreviated form, for the *Bulletin of Tibetology* in a 26-page article "Introduction to the Life of Karma Pakshi (1204/6–1283)."² This article seems to have formed a kind of outline, and perhaps formed the impetus, for the work under consideration here. The book, following acknowledgments and a brief introduction, is divided into two parts: the first on the Karmapa's life and legacy, with the second focusing on his writings. Manson details the life of the first reincarnation Karmapa, the first to be

referred to by this title, who founded and rebuilt monasteries throughout Central Asia; left a considerable number of formative verse and prose narratives on a variety of Buddhist matters; and, perhaps most famously, came into contact with and held considerable religious influence over the two descendants of Chinggis Khan, Möngke Khan and Kubilai Khan, despite the latter almost executing the Karmapa.

However, the Karmapa's compassion towards his jailors and executioner caused his executioner to commit suicide. Ultimately the female deity Palden Lhamo, a Dharmapala or wrathful protectorate deity, "appeared with forty-four thousand soldiers, declaring support for Karma Pakshi ... [f]aith in the Buddhist master, who was defying execution, was awakened. Such a miracle, Karma Pakshi wrote, had not been seen of or heard of before by anyone."³ Indeed, as recounted by Manson, visions, miracles, and dreams all play important roles in the peripatetic mendicant's life. Karma Pakshi's life and travels took him all over Eastern and Central Asia, from Kham and Amdo in the east throughout the Tibetan plateau to the capital of Kubilai's empire, Karakorum (in present-day Övörkhangaï Province in south-central Mongolia).

The Karmapa's life, his youth, education, recognition as a person of unusual spiritual qualities, his travels, his encounters and relations with the Mongol Khans, and his later years, form the substance of Part One. In Chapter One, "The Early Years," Manson places Karma Pakshi's birthplace in the highlands of Eastern Kham, while contextualizing his birth amidst a two-century build-up of new and prominent monasteries, ones that would figure prominently in Karma Pakshi's life. The chapter, after covering what is known about his parents and upbringing, focuses on the meeting between the 11-year-old Chödzin (as he was known as a child) and his first master Pomdrapka, who identified the boy as a reincarnation of a renowned meditator from Kham, as well as recognizing the boy's unique karmic predisposition. Karma Pakshi's education in the Mahāmudra commences, illustrated by a poem and a song, penned by Pakshi, inspired by Pomdrapka's lineage.

Chapter Two, "Meditation Development," traces the development of Pakshi, known as Chökyi Lama at this stage of his monastic training. Manson draws upon important primary sources including the biography of Pakshi written by his successor Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé, as well as the *Red Annals* (1363), the eighteenth-century *A Rosary of Crystal Jewels* and a 1405 biography by Kachö Wangpo. Visions continue to play a foundational role during Pakshi's solitary retreat at Selko Monastery. Following the death of Pomdrakpa in 1227, and seeking to avoid advancing Mongol forces, Pakshi moves in succession to different monasteries, ultimately settling at Shar Pungri, near Batang, for 11 years. Throughout the chapter

Manson translates pertinent poems and songs composed by Pakshi, on reincarnation, meditation, seminal Tibetan Buddhist figures, and the maṇi mantra.

Chapter Three, “Teaching, Traveling, and Building,” follows Pakshi’s rising prominence as a Buddhist missionary, his meetings with the Mongols, and his development of Tsurpu Monastery, near Lhasa, the traditional seat of the Karmapa Kagyu. Chapters Four and Five, “Meeting Möngke Khan” and “Captured by Kubilai Khan” present an historically unique series of encounters, between the warrior kings of the world’s mightiest empire at that time, and a mendicant meditator monk. Manson details the meetings first with Kubilai and his decision to leave Kubilai’s camp—spurred by a vision of Avalokiteśvara warning him of “much greed and anger”—a decision that would almost cost Pakshi his life. His time with Möngke was peaceful and beneficial for the monk, the ruler, and the ruler’s subjects, with poems from Pakshi’s memoir praising “unrivalled places of practice.”⁴ Chapter Five’s recounting of friction, mistrust, and torture ultimately resolves into mutually beneficial religious understanding between Pakshi and Kubilai as Buddhism became accepted as a central religion to the Mongol Empire.

“Return to Tsurpu,” Chapter Six, follows Pakshi as he builds what will become the seat of the Karmapa, Tsurpu, the center of the Karma Kagyu branch of Tibetan Buddhism, while in Chapter Seven, “Legacies,” the concluding chapter of Part One, Manson succinctly reviews salient accomplishments and the establishment of practices, lineages, and *termas*, inspired by Pakshi. Manson credits Karma Pakshi with being “a figure-head for the catenate reincarnation tradition for Tibetan ecclesiastics,” one continuing since Pakshi’s time throughout different lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.⁵

In Part Two, in Chapters Eight through Seventeen, Manson examines Karma Pakshi’s writings, dividing them according to subject matter, as well as by the broad genres of verse or prose narrative, with songs also, with Chapter Seventeen, “An Esoteric Great Treasury,” written in Tsurpu when Pakshi was in his late seventies (1281–1282), as part of the most complete Tibetan biography of Pakshi, *A Rosary of Crystal Jewels*, written in the late eighteenth-century by Situ Panchen and Belo Tséwang Künchab. Chapter Eight, “Preincarnations,” lays out Pakshi’s ideas on reincarnation, while also delineating the differing lineages of preincarnations and co-incarnations for the three earliest Karmapas. In Chapter Nine, “Meditations,” Manson elucidates Pakshi’s writings on meditation practice during a critical 15-year span, which covers his travels from Central Tibet, to Karakoram, to Almaliq and Xanadu, and back to Tsurpu. In six translated pieces, Pakshi proposes theories about integral Buddhist

concepts and practices, including the kāyas, the Buddha's dharmic teachings, and one-flavor realization.

Verse narrative, and then prose narrative, form the foci of Chapters Ten and Eleven, with the former chapter, "Imperial Death Warrant, Exile, and Reconciliation," providing a verse retelling of Pakshi's tumultuous tenure at Kubilai's court, and the Karmapa's near execution. Chapter Eleven, four prose pages in length, details two dreams, as described in *Account of the Erection of the Great Deity Ornament of the World*, a vision of an over 30-foot deity statue, built in 1267 in Tsurpu, and destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

Chapters Twelve through Sixteen, respectively entitled "Conversations with Mañjuśrī," "Reflections on Tantra," "Musings on Consecration," "Songs for a Disciple," and "Deathbed Song," present different aspects of Pakshi, as a visionary, as a practitioner, as a high-ranking Buddhist monk, and as a mortal preparing for death. These five chapters vary in length, genre and content, with "Musings on Consecration" pertaining more to ecclesiastical function and meaning, while the two-page poem "Song for a Disciple" (Chapter 15), sung by the "Lama of Tsurpu" (Pakshi) for Drakpa Zhonu, is a beautiful panegyric for a yogin of "stainless dharmakaya."⁶

Manson's writing throughout is erudite, concise, and navigates the complexities of the Second Karmapa's life and thought in a clear, thoughtful voice. Though a map with some of the more unfamiliar place names indicated, or a glossary of terms for those unfamiliar with Tibetan Buddhism might have been included, one feels that these might have been decisions dictated by the format of the *Lives of the Masters* series. As the most complete introduction in English, and perhaps in other languages as well, to the Second Karmapa Pakshi's life and thought, one could not ask for more.

Notes

1. <https://www.shambhala.com/lives-of-the-masters-series/>.
2. Manson, Charles. "Introduction to the Life of Karma Pakshi (1204/6 – 1283)." *Bulletin of Tibetology*. 45.1. Nmgyal Institute of Tibetology: Gantok, Sikkim. 2009. 25–51.
3. Manson, Charles. *The Second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi: Tibetan Mahāsiddha. Lives of the Masters*. Shambhala: Boulder, CO. 2022. 84.
4. Ibid 77.
5. Ibid 128
6. Ibid 214.

Notes on contributor

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