

REVISED
EDITION

John Powers

Introduction
to **TIBETAN**
BUDDHISM



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by John Powers

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To Terry and Leo

PREFACE



IN THE DECADE since the publication of the first edition of this book, a veritable flood of literature has appeared in Western languages on topics relating to Tibetan religion, history, and culture. At the same time, the availability of Tibetan texts that were either difficult to access or that had been presumed lost has increased. A number of groundbreaking studies by academics have appeared, and there is now a substantial library of treatises, videos, and CDs, as well as Internet-based resources by Tibetan masters describing aspects of their philosophical and meditative traditions, folk tales, traditional stories, biographies and autobiographies, and oral and written discourses on such topics as astrology, divination, and Vajrayāna.

The first edition was the result of years of study in university courses and libraries with primary texts, secondary works, oral instructions by lamas from the four major orders of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Géluk), as well as fieldwork in the Himalayan region. The goal of the first edition—and of the present one—was to meet the growing need for an introduction to Tibetan Buddhism written specifically for people with little or no previous exposure to the tradition.

This book is intended for an audience of undergraduates, Buddhist practitioners looking for an overview of the tradition, and readers with a general interest in the subject. It attempts to provide information regarding the history and practices of Tibetan Buddhism in a clear manner, without presuming previous knowledge of the subject, and also without assuming the supremacy (or inferiority) of any school or lineage. Its outline is not derived from any traditional organizing structure, and grows

out of my own study of this tradition and my attempts to place its components in context and to make sense of the often conflicting claims and counterclaims of its exponents.

The tragedy of Tibet's invasion and annexation by the People's Republic of China in the 1950s has had a devastating effect on the people of Tibet and their rich traditional culture, but the rest of the world has benefited from the resulting diaspora, which has brought Tibetan lamas out of their monasteries and retreat huts and into universities and newly-established Buddhist centers. Now students can have access to them in ways that would have been impossible in traditional Tibet.

As a result of their exposure to teachings and teachers from this tradition, thousands of Westerners have become Tibetan Buddhists, and there is widespread interest even among nonconverts in the public lectures of such luminaries as the Dalai Lama, Sogyel Rinpoché, Pema Norbu Rinpoché, and Sakya Tridzin. Modern technology allows their words to be printed and disseminated all over the world, in print and electronic forms. Most major cities in North America, Europe, and Australia have at least one Buddhist center, and many have several representing various denominations. College courses on Buddhism in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular are a common feature of contemporary curricula.

The present incarnation of this book incorporates a number of important new perspectives and theories. In addition, my own expanding knowledge of the subject has rendered some of my earlier conclusions questionable or outdated, but the possibility of writing a second edition provides a mechanism to revise and update my earlier work, one of the luxuries of modern word processing and publishing technology.

As with the first edition, the scope of this book is broad, encompassing history, philosophy, ritual, architecture, art, and a range of other subjects, but it still only scratches the surface of this ancient and rich culture. The first part of the book explores the Indian background in which Buddhism arose. It focuses on the figure of the Buddha, some important doctrines attributed to him, the practice and theory of Buddhist meditation, the main distinctions between the Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna schools, and the relation of Vajrayāna to other Mahāyāna systems. Part two is concerned with the history and culture of Tibet, and examines its early religious history, the present-day situation of Tibetan Buddhism, and some important aspects of the daily religious lives of Tibetan Buddhists. Part three looks at Vajrayāna and at the most influential teaching lineages of

Tibetan Buddhism, focusing on their histories, important figures, and distinctive practices.

Since beginning serious study of Tibetan Buddhism more than two decades ago, I have had the good fortune to receive oral instructions from some of the most prominent Western scholars of Buddhism as well as eminent and articulate exponents of each of the four orders of Tibetan Buddhism. Grant-giving agencies including the Australian Research Council, the American Philosophical Association, and the American Institute for Indian Studies have generously funded several years of fieldwork study in south India, the Himalayan region (including Ladakh, Zaskar, Sikkim, and Himachal Pradesh), Nepal, and various sites in northern India. I have received oral teachings, both in groups and in private, from scores of lamas, and have been allowed to witness and participate in a number of esoteric rituals. These experiences have provided the raw material for this book in both of its incarnations.

The scope of the project lies beyond the expertise of any researcher, and I would like to acknowledge my thanks to the many people who aided in the process of writing, editing, and correcting the various stages of the two editions. Sidney Piburn of Snow Lion Publications deserves credit for initiating the project and for his help throughout, as well as gently pressing me to get to work on the second edition. Joe Wilson's comments and corrections of the first section made me rethink some of my initial assumptions. Thanks are also due to William Magee for his careful reading of the manuscript and for his comments. Since beginning a teaching career, various versions of this work have been studied and critiqued by hundreds of students in the United States and Australia, and many of them have made invaluable comments and clarifications. In addition, they have helped me in adapting what I have seen and read to an audience of intelligent people with little or no background in the subject matter, and they have been perhaps my greatest resource in this process. Ronald Davidson's critique of the Sakya chapter significantly contributed to significant changes in the final version of the first edition, and I have greatly benefited from several of his conference presentations. I would also like to thank Paul Hackett for valuable information on sources. Sylvia Gretchen's contributions in proofreading the Nyingma chapter and suggesting corrections are deeply appreciated. A special debt of gratitude is owed to Jeffrey Hopkins, my graduate advisor, whose unstinting help and advice provided me with a paradigm for an academic mentor. My wife

Cindy has also made significant contributions to this project, both in terms of material support and through her help and encouragement. Her explanations of contemporary Western psychology and counseling techniques were very helpful in reaching an understanding of how they differ from Buddhist meditation practices.

A number of Tibetan scholars have contributed significantly to this book, among them the late Kensur Yéshé Thubten of Loseling Monastic College, with whom I studied in graduate school and during a year in India. Throughout my time in graduate school, Géshé Jambel Thardo patiently answered questions and provided oral instructions on a wide range of subjects, and much of my understanding of the Gélukpa scholastic system is due to him. Thanks are also due to Géshé Palden Dragpa of Tibet House in Delhi and Georges Dreyfus of Williams College, who initiated me into the subtleties of Tibetan oral debate and who patiently answered hundreds of questions during our graduate studies. While in India in 1988, many productive hours were spent discussing Buddhist philosophy with Professor Yéshé Thabkhé of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies. My sincere thanks to Ven. Samdhong Rinpoché, the current Kalon Tripa of the Tibetan exile government's legislative assembly and former Vice-Chancellor of the Central Institute, and to Géshé Ngawang Samten for allowing me to study there on several occasions and for making available the considerable resources of that wonderful institution.

Several Sakya lamas, including H.E. Chogyé Trichen Rinpoché and Lama Choedak Rinpoché, have generously shared their knowledge of the "triple vision" and "path and result" teachings over the past several years and helped me to understand their complexities. Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoché guided me and a small group of students through Mipam's exposition of the "great perfection" during a memorable summer, and Khamtrül Rinpoché provided months of instructions on the preliminary practices and the techniques of great perfection meditation during a fieldwork trip to Dharamsala in the 1990s. I would also like to thank H.H. the Dalai Lama for making time in his busy schedule to talk with me on several occasions and for the insights provided by his public lectures. Thanks are also due to Khenpo Könchog Gyeltsen for his many helpful talks on the Kagyu order and his making time to answer questions. I have also benefited from several invitations to lecture at the Kagyu E-wam Buddhist Institute in Melbourne, founded by Traleg Rinpoché, and from my informal discussions with him on various topics of Buddhist philosophy and practice

The Tibetan lamas who are now teaching publicly and publishing works for a Western audience are well versed in their respective traditions, but are generally not trained to place them in a wider context in Tibet or the Buddhist world, nor do their backgrounds prepare them for comparing their orders' teachings and practices to those of other traditions. Much of Tibetan Buddhist literature is tinged with sectarian biases and broad (sometimes unfounded) generalizations about orders other than the one to which a particular teacher belongs, and the claims and counterclaims often prove confusing for those who have recently begun their study. In addition, traditional Tibetan mythology and hagiographical stories are often repeated by lamas who assume them to be veridical, and this creates conceptual difficulties for many Westerners, particularly those who have been exposed to modern science and skeptical philosophy. In a sense, this book is intended to explain Tibetan Buddhism to a foreign audience, one composed of people whose background and education resemble my own and who have encountered many of the same conceptual problems, questions, and gaps that I have during my ongoing engagement with Tibetan Buddhism and its exponents. This is a rich and diverse tradition, and I expect that there will be a number of future editions, each of which will reflect my deepening and expanding understanding of this subject, as well as changing perspectives and theories.

During the years I have studied Tibetan Buddhism and lived with Tibetans, it has become clear to me that this tradition is one of the richest shared legacies of humankind. It is my hope that this book will help make Tibetan Buddhism more accessible to interested students and that it will benefit sentient beings everywhere.

TECHNICAL NOTE

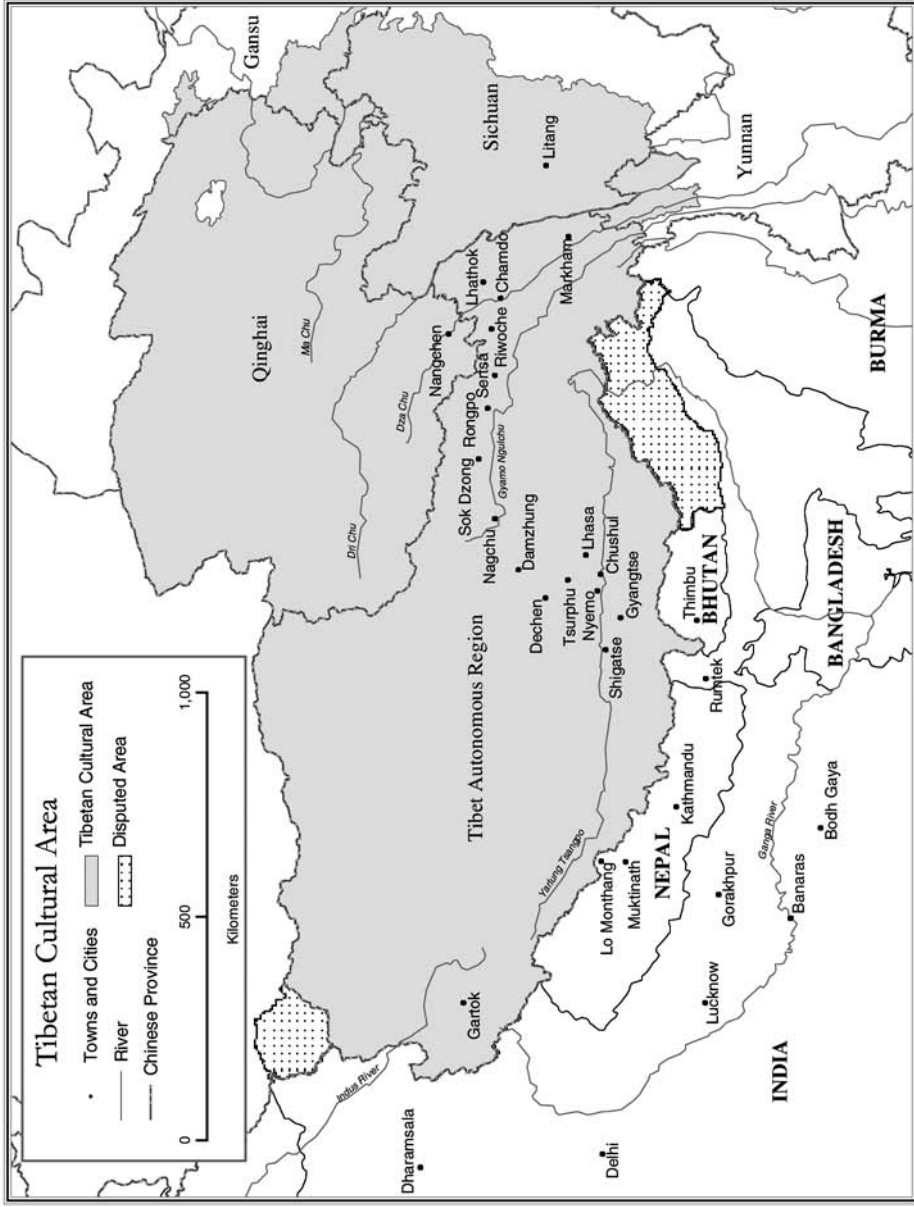


IN KEEPING with the introductory nature of this work, technical terms have been kept to a minimum. Some Tibetan words have been spelled phonetically and treated as English words, while others have been given English translations. The first occurrence of the most important technical terms is accompanied by an italicized transliteration in parentheses. All other terms, as well as names, places, and titles of texts are given in indexes, along with their transliterated spellings. The transliteration follows the system of Turrell Wylie, which he describes in his article, “A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription” (*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 22, 1959, pp. 261–76).

Phonetic spellings of terms, names, and places have been adopted for the benefit of nonspecialists, who are often bewildered by the many unpronounced consonants found in Tibetan and by the subtleties of Tibetan pronunciation. Most words have been phoneticized in accordance with the dialect of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and its cultural and religious center. Pronunciations of these words vary greatly in other parts of Tibet, but the central Tibetan pronunciation was chosen as the most commonly accepted standard. Some familiar terms have been rendered in accordance with their common spelling: for example, “Bön” and “Sakya.” In this edition I have adopted umlauts and accent marks to facilitate pronunciation of some Tibetan sounds. Thus, the “ö” in *chö* (the Tibetan equivalent of the Sanskrit term *dharma*) is pronounced as in German, and the “é” in *rinpoché* is pronounced “ay.” Many Tibetan teachers who teach and publish in the West have established transliterations of their names that are widely used

(e.g., Lama Yeshe), and I have used these in this book instead of my own phonetic system.

Most of the quotations used in the text are taken from English language publications. In cases where none was available (or where I disagreed with a published translation) my own translations have been provided. The decision to use other translations was based on complaints from students who read early versions of the manuscript and noted that for nonspecialists it is often frustrating to read a pithy quote and not be able to read the original text in order to obtain further information or explore the context.



Created by Tsering Wangyal Shawa

INTRODUCTION



AT DAWN in Dharamsala, as the sun rises over the mountains, a number of people are already awake and walking on the path around the residence of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. Dharamsala is a small town in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh perched on the side of Mt. Dhauladhar in the foothills of the Himalayas, the world's highest mountains. Dharamsala today is the center of the Tibetan Buddhist exile community in India and the home of the Dalai Lama. Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, is considered by his followers to be a physical manifestation of Avalokiteśvara (*Chenrezi*), the buddha of compassion and patron deity of Tibet. Forced to flee his homeland in 1959 when the Chinese army forcibly annexed Tibet, he and many of his people have resettled in India, where they continue to look over the mountains, hoping someday to return to their homeland.

The harsh realities of diaspora and the tenuousness of their position in exile have not dimmed the reverence of the Tibetan people for the Dalai Lama, and the crowds that circumambulate his residence in Dharamsala are a testament to their respect for him. The individuals and groups walking the path are a cross-section of the Tibetan community: male and female, young and old, lay and monastic, and people from all levels of society. Some are on their way to work or to shop, and chose the route around the Dalai Lama's residence because they believe that circumambulating it brings merit, even if one only walks part of the way. Many of those on the path will make the circuit a number of times, and their trek will be an act of religious devotion.

Most carry prayer beads, used to mark the number of times they chant

a mantra. The use of mantras is deeply rooted in Tibetan Buddhism. They are short prayers that are thought to subtly alter one's mind and make a connection with a particular buddha, or awakened being. Tibetan Buddhism has no gods in the Western sense of the term—the deities of Tibetan Buddhism are buddhas, literally “awakened ones,” who in past lives were ordinary people, but who have transcended the ordinary through their meditations and realizations. When Tibetans chant a mantra associated with a particular buddha, they are not simply asking for the blessings and aid of the buddha—the final goal of the practice is to become buddhas themselves, since buddhas are sentient beings who have actualized the highest potential that we all possess.

The Tibetans walking around the Dalai Lama's palace often chant the mantra of Avalokiteśvara—*oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*—a practice that pays tribute to the Dalai Lama as an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara and focuses their minds on the goal of eventually attaining his level of wisdom and compassion, the two primary qualities that buddhas embody. Many will stop along the path at *chödens* (*mchod rten, stūpa*),¹ small shrines that generally contain religious artifacts of some sort. Often the Tibetans will make prostrations toward the chödens or toward the Dalai Lama's residence. This is thought to bring great religious merit and, like the chanting of mantras, helps to orient one's mind to the goal of buddhahood.

One notable feature of this practice is its primary focus: other living beings. It is generally thought that if one performs religious actions solely for one's own benefit, the practices are ineffective and yield little or no merit. Since one is trying to attain buddhahood—and since buddhas are beings whose compassion extends to all living creatures—anyone who chants the mantra of the buddha of compassion or pays homage to the Dalai Lama seeking personal gain is thought to be profoundly misguided. Tibetans recognize this, and when asked will generally indicate that they offer the merit of their religious devotions for the benefit of all sentient beings.

All along the path are religious symbols, most of which are connected with Avalokiteśvara or his human manifestation, the Dalai Lama. There are several *maṇi* walls, which are piles of stones, each of which is inscribed with the mantra *oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*. This literally means “*oṃ* in the jewel lotus *hūṃ*,” although few of the Tibetans who chant the mantra would be aware of this. For most it is simply an invocation to the Dalai Lama and Avalokiteśvara that brings merit in both the present and future lives. In

Indian Buddhist scriptures, the mantra is related to the notion that beings born in the “pure land” of Sukhāvātī (Joyous Land) arise in jeweled lotuses rather than wombs, and the mantra probably originally expressed an aspiration for rebirth there. Avalokiteśvara is one of the principal figures of Sukhāvātī and is closely associated with Amitābha, the buddha who rules over it.²

The mantra has been interpreted in various ways, and Buddhist teachers commonly associate it with aspects of Buddhist thought and practice. The Dalai Lama, for example, relates it to the twin factors of method (skillfully adapting one’s actions for the benefit of others) and wisdom (comprehending the true nature of reality) and the transformation of one’s body, speech, and mind into those of a buddha.³ A number of Tibetan teachers have connected each of the six syllables with the six “perfections” (*pha rol tu phyin pa, pāramitā*: generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom) in which those who are on the path to buddhahood train, while others relate them to the six realms of rebirth and escape from them.⁴

The lotus (*padma*) is an important symbol in Tibetan Buddhism and is commonly associated with the process of becoming a buddha. In Tibetan Buddhist iconography, buddhas are often seated on lotus thrones, indicating their transcendent state. A lotus is born in the muck and mud at the bottom of a swamp, but when it emerges on the surface of the water and opens its petals a beautiful flower appears, unstained by the mud from which it arose. Similarly, the compassion and wisdom of buddhas arise from the muck of the ordinary world, which is characterized by fighting, hatred, distrust, anxiety, and other negative emotions. These emotions tend to cause people to become self-centered and lead to suffering and harmful actions. But just as the world is the locus of destructive emotions, it is also the place in which we can become buddhas, perfected beings who have awakened from the sleep of ignorance and who perceive reality as it is, with absolute clarity and with profound compassion for suffering living beings.

Just as the lotus arises from the bottom of a swamp, so buddhas were formerly humans, immersed in the negative thoughts and actions in which all ordinary beings engage: the strife, wars, petty jealousies, and hatreds to which all humans, animals, and other creatures are subject. Through their meditative training, however, buddhas have transcended such things, and like lotuses have risen above their murky origins and look down on them

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