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Book Review of The Gathering of Intentions: A History of a Tibetan Tantra by Jacob P. Dalton (Reviewed by Swami Narasimhananda)

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Jacob P. Dalton. *The Gathering of Intentions: A History of A Tibetan Tantra*. xxvi + 246 pp.. New York: Columbia University Press. \$ 60.00 (Hardcover).

This book could be seen as a novel method of tracing the history of a scripture. Jacob P. Dalton does this by “tracing the vicissitudes of a single ritual system—that of the *Gathering of Intentions Sutra* (*Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*)—from its ninth-century origins to the present day” (xv). This tantra is referred to as the “root tantra” and is vital for understanding the history of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly the Nyingma school. This book is divided into seven chapters focusing on the various forms of the traditions surrounding this text.

Dalton gives an interesting account of his first encounter with the text by recounting his experiences in the Preface. He tells us in captivating language that while staying at Namdröling monastery in south India, he “began to work” his “way through the *Gathering of Intentions*” (vii). He explains how he had to request repeatedly Penor Rinpoche for being initiated into the “nine vehicles of the Nyingma School’s teachings” (ix), albeit only after being reprimanded for having attempted a translation of the text without having been initiated into its practice. The initiation took place at Namdröling monastery for three days amidst “hard rain.”

The beginning sets the tone for the rest of this book. Dalton's book is proof that analytical discussions on the history of a religious text need not be dull and boring. He deftly weaves the web of various narratives and myths associated with the text and in the process creates a powerful narrative of his own. Throughout the book Dalton emphasises the uniqueness of the text. About its special language, he says: "Almost all Tibetan canonical works—sutras and tantras—are supposed to have been translated from Sanskrit originals. The *Gathering of Intentions* represents a rare exception, for it purports to have been translated into Tibetan from Burshaski (Tib. *Bru sha skad*), a linguistically exotic language spoken today in just one remote valley in Kashmir" (xviii).

This book is not just the history of a Tibetan Buddhist text, but also a rare and fairly detailed account of the growth of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism. This book could also be easily used as a manual for analysing the linguistic nuances of a religious text and its translations. Such analyses by Dalton make him effortlessly arrive at conclusions like this: "All this suggests that most of the *Gathering of Intentions* was composed directly in Tibetan, though around an original core of the narrative sections of the Rudra myth that were translated from Burushaski" (7).

Dalton is sure that the "*Gathering of Intentions*' authors and Nupchen following them, saw their composition as a work of 'Secret Mantra,' by which they meant the three classes of 'inner tantras,' Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga. Nonetheless, beginning around the eleventh or twelfth century, followers of the Nyingma school classified the *Gathering of Intentions* as a work of Anuyoga alone" (36). The "diffuse" role of this tantra is evident by its "rarely apparent" influence (132). Dalton discusses the "Four Root Tantras of Anuyoga" in an appendix to this book (133–48).

While analysing a religious text, its oral traditions are often overlooked. Dalton is quite careful to avoid this mistake and apart from devoting an entire chapter to "The Spoken Teachings," dedicates another chapter to "The Mindröling Tradition" that has a large corpus of spoken teachings.

A glossary of technical terms complements the sixty-two pages of notes. The bibliography is quite useful. Throughout this book, Dalton quotes from the text of the tantra and its commentaries and thus gives the reader a first-hand experience of the text. Dalton's work brings back the emphasis on the ritual tradition of a religious text. All scholars of religion would do themselves great help by reading this book and trying to apply these techniques to their own research.

Reviewed by Swami Narasimhananda, Editor, Prabuddha Bharata

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