
Kurtis R. Schaeffer. *Dreaming the Great Brahmin: Tibetan Traditions of the Buddhist Poet-Saint Saraha*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 224p.

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In *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, Kurtis R. Schaeffer gives a cultural and historical analysis of the mahasiddha Saraha, author of a collection of poems called the *Dohakosa*—or more precisely of the figure of Saraha as a cultural icon—and a translation of the verses attributed to him. These are both relevant and useful contributions to the academic field of Buddhist Studies and to the developing Indo-Tibetan Buddhist culture among English speakers, presenting a cultural analysis that can be profitably extended to Buddhism under late capitalism, so called western Buddhism.

Schaeffer concludes that the archetypal tantric guru, Saraha, is ultimately a meme, a circulating bit of culture and a cultural function. “The figure to whom the name ‘Saraha’ is given is a construct of the religious imagination, and a vibrant one at that,” Schaeffer explains (4). “I am concerned not with discovering the true identity of the author of the Dohakosa...but with studying Tibetan, Nepalese, and Indian hagiographic narratives of Saraha’s life as constituting interesting literary traditions in their own right” (4). Schaeffer extrapolates these literary traditions into the cultural, political, and hermeneutic contingencies of Himalayan history, demonstrating how the Saraha-meme was reconfigured as it was involved in polemic or simple pedagogy. In this way, Schaeffer finds the means to the end he sets for himself: to explicate “the creative traditions that gave life to him in the Tibetan religious imagination” through analysis of the *Dohakosa*’s “textual corpus and the figure of Saraha utilizing equal parts of historical, philological, and interpretive means” (5).

The translation of the *Dohakosa* included in *Dreaming the Great Brahmin*, coupled with a full commentary by a 12th-century Tibetan writer, Chomden Ralri, demonstrate one instance of this re-imagining in accessible, precise English. According to Schaeffer, “Chomden Ralri undertakes a challenging attempt to insinuate the order of a systematic philosophical presentation into a relatively unsystematic work” (125); this attempt guides the reader through Saraha’s *dohas* thematically and in the process reveals just what was at stake for Tibet: the resolution of longstanding disputes among monastic institutions (intellectual and otherwise) and thereby the standing political order. This is worked out in the rather abstruse language of Madhyamika, Buddhist dialectics.

Even so, Saraha’s verses emphasize an imperative that arises repeatedly in the more popular expressions of “western Buddhism”: to choose an active lay life instead of monastic renunciation, to find enlightenment in the everyday. This aspect

of the Mahamudra tradition is that from which a foundational gesture of western Buddhism arose, the Shambhala teachings of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his student, bestselling author Pema Chodron. Schaeffer's translation of Saraha with Chomden Ralri is in part intended for this context, posing the question: what has the negotiations of political contingencies through spiritual language, or the articulation of spiritual teachings under a given set of political or cultural circumstances, to do with tradition, the function of tradition, the integrity of tradition, even the efficacy of a particular meditative tradition?

As cultural theorists such as Slavoj Žižek become concerned with the ideological and cultural functions of western Buddhism, Shaeffer's study at once gives a clear historical example of how Buddhism as such had been transmitted prior to capitalism, and contributes this analysis to the growing body of western Buddhist literature. Specifically, Shaeffer develops a view of Saraha in which different Tibetans have invented a source of Indian authority for their own innovations (10), a gesture that may very well be ideological in form and function. On this ground, Schaeffer's study of Saraha invites a cultural and ideological analysis of the functions of a meme such as Saraha (or on very different grounds, Trungpa) in the contemporary spiritual marketplace. ✱