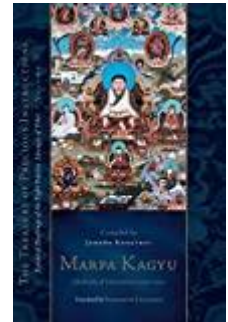


**Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé, comp., Elizabeth Callahan, trans. *Marpa Kagyu: Methods of Liberation, Part 1; Essential Teachings of the Eight Practice Lineages of Tibet, vol. 7 of The Treasury of Precious Instructions*. Boulder: Snow Lion, 2023. 1,240 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61180-888-9.**



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The book under review is a translation of a section from a large collection of Tibetan classics called the *Treasury of Precious Instructions* (*gDams ngag rin po che'i mdzod*). The original was compiled and composed by Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Taye ('Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813–99) between 1871 and 1887, at the behest and with the collaboration of his colleague Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo ('Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, 1820–92). The collection brings together the empowerments, instructions, and practices of the “eight great chariots of the practice lineages” (*sgrub brgyud shing rta chen po brgyad*), that is to say, a very large number of transmissions representing most lineages of Tibetan Buddhism that were imported from India between the eighth and the twelfth centuries. This compendium is a perfect example of the “nonsectarian” (*ris med*) approach that developed in nineteenth-century eastern Tibet and remains to this day a model for Tibetan Buddhists, although the hazards of Tibetan politics often do not live up to the ideal.

This particular book, *Marpa Kagyü: Methods of Liberation, Part One*, is the first of four volumes about Kagyü instructions and the seventh out of the eighteen comprising the *Treasury of Precious Instructions*. It contains the root texts and commentaries on Mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*), the “path of liberation,” and on the Six Dharmas of Nāropa (*nā ro chos drug*), or the “path of methods.” These are the two main special practices of all Kagyü lineages. This volume is therefore the most central of the four volumes and a reference work for scholars and practitioners of that lineage. It is translated by Elizabeth Callahan, a practitioner and scholar of the Kagyü tradition, with decades of experience and several other tremendous contributions to the field, such as the translation of Dakpo Tashi Namgyal's (*Dwags po bkra shis rnam rgyal*, 1511–87) *Moonbeams of Mahāmudra* (*Phyag chen zla ba 'od zer*) (2019) and the Third Karmapa's (*Rang 'byung rdo rje*, 1284–1339) *Profound Inner Principles* (*Zab mo nang don*) (2014). Although several of the Mahāmudrā reference texts in this volume have

already been published or are being translated by Karl Brunnhölzl, it is an extremely fortunate occurrence to have them alongside reference texts on the Six Dharmas, presented with clear and useful terminology, by someone who has an experience of the subject in question, from both an intellectual and practical perspective.[1]

The name featuring in the first part of the title —“Marpa Kagyü”—refers to the Tibetan founder of that lineage, Marpa Chökyi Lodrö (Mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1000-81) and is used in this case as an umbrella term for all Kagyü lineages that separated into the four primary and eight secondary Dakpo Kagyü lineages after Gampopa (sGam po pa, 1079-1153). Callahan points out that although all modern editions, including the Shechen edition used for the project at hand, refer to these volumes as “Marpa Kagyü,” Kongtrül called them “Kagyü” in his catalogue.[2] The edition published by Lama Ngodrup and Sherab Drimey contains an introduction not included in the Shechen edition, with an enlightening remark by Kongtrül in that regard: “Volume 7 is the first on Kagyü of the *Treasury of Precious Instructions*. The Kagyü [lineage], the fourth great chariot of the practice lineages [founded] by the great Marpa Lotsāwa, who is [an emanation] of Hevajra, has a root and branches. The root is represented by the sources of the ocean of Tibetan realized masters, namely, tantras and the esoteric instructions of the learned and accomplished Indian masters of the Four Descents. This very profound and vast tradition is without measure nor limit, but it mainly consists in the Indian Mahāmudrā Texts, in the *sadhānas* associated with the Seven Ngok Maṇḍalas, etc., as well as the empowerments, the manuals of instructions on the perfection process, and the esoteric instructions textbooks on methods [i.e., the Six Dharmas] and liberation [i.e., Mahāmudrā]. These figure in the most important of the five treasuries, the great *Treasury of Kagyü Mantras*, together with their supporting material. Here, in the *Treasury of Precious Instructions*, are con-

tained the quintessential crucial points of the esoteric instructions.”[3]

Thus, Kagyü foundational texts figure in two of the treasuries, namely, the *Treasury of Kagyü Mantras* and the *Treasury of Precious Instructions*. The former contains the texts dealing with the generation and perfection processes of the main tantras that Marpa received from his Indian masters, among others the Seven Ngok Maṇḍalas. As I have argued elsewhere, the Ngok transmission, not represented in this volume of the *Treasury of Precious Instructions*, is what can more literally be called “Marpa Kagyü.”[4] What is gathered in the *Treasury of Precious Instructions* are the general Kagyü root texts on methods and liberation, and what Kongtrül called the “branches,” the teachings developed in Tibet by Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1051-1135), Gampopa, and their disciples. It is significant that the *Treasury of Kagyü Mantras* contains the empowerments for the main thirteen maṇḍalas of the Kagyü schools (not all of them coming from Marpa), and that this collection contains empowerments associated with the Aural Transmission (*snyan brgyud*) and teachings coming from the Kagyü sub-lineages, which are both not included in the *Treasury of Kagyü Mantras*. For this reason, I would argue that a more apt title for this volume and the following three should be “Kagyü” rather than “Marpa Kagyü.”

Regarding the second part of the title—“Methods of Liberation”—it could easily be read as a rendering of the Tibetan term *tapdröl* (*thabs grol*). This, however, refers to two things: the Six Dharmas (the “path of methods,” *thabs lam*) and Mahāmudrā (the “path of liberation,” *grol lam*). It seems therefore that “methods *and* liberation” would be a more precise title for the four Kagyü volumes than the generic “methods *of* liberation,” which could fit any of the eight sets of esoteric instructions gathered by Kongtrül. I would therefore argue that the title “Kagyü: The Path of Methods

and Liberation” might better convey the general content of the four volumes.

Returning to the content of the four Kagyü volumes, it is only the first part of the present volume (the seventh of the *Treasury of Precious Instructions*) that can, to some extent, call on Marpa Kagyü as the common denominator of all Kagyü sub-lineages. The volume has two main parts. Part 1 (“The Cycle of Root Texts and Commentaries”) is divided into the “shared Mahāmudrā cycle,” that is, Indian Mahāmudrā texts, and the “unshared Six Dharmas cycle,” meaning Indian texts (and one by Milarepa) on the various practices associated with the perfection process. Part 2 covers the “instructions” by the various Tibetan Kagyü sub-lineages, which run from volumes 7 to 10. Volume 7 has several empowerments (*abhiṣekas*) from the Aural Transmission containing practice texts (*sadhānas*) and maṇḍala rituals associated with Cakrasaṃvara and Vajrayoginī. This represents the path of maturation (*smin lam*, “empowerment”). It then contains instructions transmitted in the Rechung Aural Transmission, which represent the path of liberation (*grol lam*). Volume 8 contains instructions from the other Aural Transmission lineages (the Ngamdzung and Dakpo Nyengyü) as well as instructions from the Dakpo Kagyü (preserved in Gampopa’s monastery of Dhagla Gampo) and Tsarpa Kagyü (founded by Lama Zhang). Volumes 9 and 10 contain teachings from the approaches developed mostly by the Karma, Drikung, and Drukpa Kagyü lineages.

With more than 1,200 pages and being just one of eighteen books of *The Treasury of Precious Instructions* planned to be translated by the Tsadra team and published by Snow Lion (nine have already been published at the time of review), this work is clearly part of a large-scale project, one that continues the previously completed translation of another of Kongtrül’s collection, *The Treasury of Knowledge* (*Shes bya mdzod*), whose ten volumes have been published by Snow Lion

between 2003 and 2012. To ease access to the instructions, a dedicated wiki developed by the Tsadra Foundation provides a full outline with links to all the Tibetan texts in unicode, plus their titles in English and the introductions as published in the books.[5] Shambhala (Snow Lion has been an imprint of Shambhala Publications since 2012) also offers a general public description in English on its website, with many resources, such as podcasts and videos by the translators of the various volumes, as well as a free download of the catalogue of the collection translated by Richard Barron that retraces the history of each of the eight chariots.[6] All in all, it is evident that the Tsadra team has exerted considerable effort in making this material widely available and as user-friendly as possible. The present book, and the collection as a whole, will certainly be a reference in the future, as it is now the case for the *Treasury of Knowledge*.

That being said, it is also clear that some of the material of the collection is not intended for a large public. As Callahan herself remarks, “some of the texts in this volume are famous and widely known in translation, such as Tilopa’s (988-1069) *Ganges Mahāmudrā*. Their content is suitable and inspiring for many levels of Buddhist practitioners. The Six Dharma texts describe practices that require years of prior training and careful guidance. The texts in the *abhiṣeka* section are for lineage holders authorized and qualified to give those *abhiṣekas*” (p. xxx). It is in fact likely that some of the translations, such as those in the *abhiṣeka* and Aural Transmission sections, which even in Tibetan are very rare due to their very specific and esoteric nature, will indeed be of little use to most readers. It is certainly the same situation in most of the other eighteen volumes: Kongtrül wanted to preserve traditions that had been on the verge of extinction, not to compile a set of classical religious literature. Nowadays, in the twenty-first century and in a culture completely different from that of nineteenth-century Tibet, very few readers will be able to understand

what these texts are about, let alone use them. It will probably be useful to those engaged in research on these topics, and maybe to those who actually practice them, although some of the lineages have not spread widely in the West. This, however, is true for any project of this magnitude, such as 84000 or the Khyentse Vision Project: the texts that are important have often been translated elsewhere, and the others are so specific that even reading them can be challenging.[7] That being said, it remains important that such projects exist, to allow an encompassing and profound understanding of Tibetan literature and religion, and to preserve in English the transmissions that developed in Tibet. It must also be noted that this kind of literature, if well translated, is commonly more user-friendly and accessible in English than it is in Tibetan, complemented as it often is by introductions, critical editions (or at least comparison of sources), footnotes, bibliographies, glossaries, etc. Thus, this volume, although of a very specific and esoteric nature, is a precious addition to the Tibetan literature in translation available from general public publishers.

With regard to the resources provided in this book, the general introduction is limited to the series' introduction, the translation of Kongtrül's index, and a few pages of presentation by the translator. This is short compared to other translations of this kind of literature (the volumes of the *Treasury of Knowledge* series, for instance, have much lengthier introductions summarizing the content of each volume), but it can be explained in light of the resources available online and of the targeted audience. This book is a collection of reference material for readers who probably already possess all the *Treasury of Knowledge* translations and need no lengthy introduction of Kongtrül's life, the five treasures, and so on.

As she explains in the introduction, Callahan used whenever available several editions of each text but without making a thorough critical edition. In many cases, she found that the Tibetan ori-

ginal of the *Treasury of Precious Instructions* was faulty, and it was edited based on alternative readings. All the versions consulted are described in the first note of each text together with the Tibetan commentaries used and any secondary literature. A list of these editions with their bibliographical details is provided on pages 903–9. While this non-systematic approach does not correspond to academic standards, it is, quite understandably, widespread in the scholarly Buddhist community and with large-scale projects such as this one. This approach allows for the translations to be made available by trade publishers and read by an educated audience, and does not prevent academic scholars to propose more philologically precise editions of the same works. The approaches, sometimes aiming for the same objective and offered by the same scholars, complement each other. The obvious benefit of this translation is the personal experience of the translator in the practices described and her long experience with translation of similar material, aiming at a clear, simple, and no-nonsense presentation of the texts. The same cannot be said of some academic works that may be critically edited but sometimes use overly arcane terminology and demonstrate a shallow understanding of what the texts are actually about.

The translator briefly introduces each individual text, with its author, context, history, and Indian and Tibetan commentaries, often based on primary rather than secondary sources. Each introduction also contains Kongtrül's description of the lineage of transmission up to himself. Two kinds of notes are provided: footnotes with symbols that give historical and commentarial comments and are more directly useful to readers interested in the meaning, and endnotes with numbers that provide bibliographic details, primary and secondary references, and alternative readings, and that are useful to readers interested in the words and those who want to explore these texts further. This approach is quite practical and user-friendly: one can read the text as a practition-

er or as a scholar (or both), and choose between general attention to content or more precise interest to form. There is a balance of 4 to 1 between translations (883 pages, pp. 5–888) and notes (208 pages, pp. 928–1136); this contrasts with many of the volumes of the *Treasury of Knowledge*, which contain much more notes (sometimes with a ratio of 1 to 1). The part on the Cakrasaṃvara Aural Transmission has more notes, both commentarial and philological, which is explained by the fact that these transmissions are less studied than the others and seem even more complex. The alternative translations deriving from the use of various Tibetan commentaries on *The Short Text* by Tilopa (see, for example, the footnotes on pages 782–83) give a good example of the background knowledge necessary to translate such “dense and cryptically written” texts (p. 780). The “concordance” between English translation and Tibetan term provided on pages 911–23 is a practical addition to the annex material. Another useful tool (for translators wishing to emulate Callahan’s terminology) is the inclusion of a Tibetan to English concordance.

Regarding the quality of the translation, the readability, consistency, precision, and elegance of the texts examined for the present review are impeccable and truly an example to follow. Whatever remarks I offer here are only intended to provoke thought rather than criticize the work done, which is impressive and inspiring in many ways. The first of such remarks regards the language used for some translations. As usual in her translations, Callahan uses a blend of well-thought and precise English words and Sanskrit and Tibetan for some terms of art (often easier to understand in original languages than to recognize in English, particularly in the *Profound Inner Principles*, for example, which contains a lot of terms referring to things in the subtle body or the world that do not conceptually exist in English). Nonetheless, the reason why some terms are not translated, and why Sanskrit rather than Tibetan or Tibetan rather than Sanskrit, is used is not always clear: Why, for example, use the Sanskrit *caṇḍālī*

rather than the Tibetan *tummo* (*gtum mo*) or the English “inner heat”? Why *bardo* (Tib) rather than *antarābhava* (Skt) or “intermediate state”? As she notes on page 266, for the section of the maturing *abhiṣekas* of the Aural Transmission traditions, Callahan partially adopts in these texts terminology developed by the Nalanda/Vajravairochana Translation Committee founded by Chögyam Trungpa, as this community is the main one to use practice texts associated with Cakrasaṃvara and Vajrayoginī in English. It is possible that a similar reason—the widespread use of some terms in some communities—is guiding the choice to use *caṇḍālī* and *bardo*, but this is not clarified in the introduction.

Second, if one takes as an example the translation of the creation process of Cakrasaṃvara in union translated on pages 283–85, the words “I” or “mine” are extensively used for anything related to Cakrasaṃvara and “she” or “her” for the female consort, Vajrayoginī. The original Tibetan once uses the term *daknyi* (*bdag nyid*), “I,” at the beginning of the section, but then, as is usual in *sadhānas* and in Tibetan, no pronoun is used, only the body parts and their attributes.[8] The English, however, systematically reads, “My main face is dark blue, my left is green” (p. 284). This dilemma is well known to those who translate practice texts: While it is useful to be clear on the process (hence “I” is used at the beginning to clearly show that this is a self-creation), is it really necessary to boost self-identification by saying “my” all the time? Is it really “my” face? Who is this “I”? Furthermore, the fact that Vajrayoginī is referred to as “she” or “her” leads one to wonder: Is the practitioner not Vajrayoginī as well as he or she is Cakrasaṃvara? Is it necessary to boost the duality between male and female consort when actually “I” am both, as well as all deities around, the palace, etc.? It would seem to me that a more nuanced use of the words “I” and “my” to only render analogous personal pronouns and possessive adjectives in Tibetan (*nga*, *bdag*, *bdag nyid*) and a less differentiated treatment of male and fe-

male consort as well as of the surrounding deities would better serve the process of meditation. “The left head,” “his right hand,” and “her left hand,” for example, are more faithful to the source language and more conducive to a less self-identified and more encompassing embodiment of the deities meditated upon.

Overall, this volume of the *Treasury of Precious Instruction* can be considered a reference work for both academic and Buddhist readers, worth buying as a book and as an e-text to use as a reference on specific topics and as a searchable tool. The down-to-earth and straightforward yet precise and beautiful style of translation, the short but helpful and well-researched introductions, and the balanced and useful use of footnotes and endnotes all contribute to a work that readers can rely on and use in many contexts. Of course, this hefty book is not a novel and cannot be read from beginning to end. As plainly stated by the translator, some texts will be of little use to many readers due to their esoteric nature. Each text, however, is a world of its own, part of a complex and multifaceted Kagyü tradition. To have them together is an important addition to our knowledge of the Kagyü lineage. At a larger scale, if the quality of the other volumes equals this one, then the translation of the *Treasury of Precious Instruction* will certainly change the way we understand the Tibetan tradition as a whole. Therefore, *Marpa Kagyü: Methods of Liberation, Part One* is a very fortunate addition to the world of Tibetology and Tibetan Buddhism.

#### Notes

[1]. None of the texts in the *abhiṣeka* and Aural Transmission sections have been translated. Most references are Mahāmudrā texts, and a few preliminary studies on the Six Dharmas. See, for example, Gerardo Abboud, Adam Kane, and Sean Price, trans., *The Supreme Siddhi of Mahamudra: Teachings, Poems, and Songs of the Drukpa Kagyu Lineage* (Boulder, CO: Snow Lion, 2017); Roger R.

Jackson, trans. and comp., *Tantric Treasures: Three Collections of Mystical Verse from Buddhist India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Klaus-Dieter Mathes, *A Fine Blend of Mahāmudrā and Madhyamaka: Maitrīpa's Collection of Texts on Non-conceptual Realization (Amanasikāra)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2016); Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *Dreaming the Great Brahmin: Tibetan Traditions of the Buddhist Poet-Saint Saraha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, “Paracanonical Manuscript-Traditions of Tilopa's Ganggā ma Mahāmudrā: Translation of the Version Preserved by the Aural Transmission Tradition,” in *Unearthing Himalayan Treasures: Festschrift for Franz-Karl Ehrhard* (Marburg: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 2019), 417-31; Fabrizio Torricelli, “The Tibetan Text of Tilopa's Śaddharmopadeśa,” *East and West* 46 (1996): 145-66; Fabrizio Torricelli, “The Tanjur Text of the Ājñāsaṃyak-pramāṇa-nāma-ḍākinyupadeśa,” *East and West* 47 (1997): 249-69; Fabrizio Torricelli, “A Tanjur Text on gTum-mo: Tōhoku no. 2332 – I,” *Tibet Journal* 21 (1997): 30-46; Fabrizio Torricelli, “The Tibetan Text of the Karnatantravajrapada,” *East and West* 48 (1998): 385-425; Tsangnyön Heruka, *The Life of Marpa the Translator: Seeing Accomplishes All*, trans. Nālandā Translation Committee (Boston: Shambhala, 1995); and Chos grags rgya mtsho, Karmapa VII, *Sounds of Innate Freedom: The Indian Texts of Mahāmudrā*, trans. Karl Brunnhölzl, vols. 3-5 (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2020-23) (the other three volumes will appear in the next couple of years).

[2]. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, *gDams ngag mdzod (DNZ)* (Delhi: Shechen Publications, 1999), Buddhist Digital Resource Center, bdr: MW23605.

[3]. "gdams ngag mdzod/ bka' brgyud pod dang po/ ja/ sgrub brgyud shing rta chen po bzhi pa dgyes mdzad mar pa lo tsā chen po'i bka' brgyud la rtsa ba dang yan lag gi bka' brgyud gnyis las/ dang po gangs can grub thob rgya mtsho'i chu

'go 'phags yul bka' 'bab bzhi yi paṅ grub rnam kyi rgyud dang man ngag gi brgyud srol shin tu zab cing rgya che bar bzhugs pa tshad dang mu mtha' med pa'i gtso bo phyag chen rgya gzhung/ rngog dkyil bdun la sogs pa'i sgrub mthabs dang/ dbang/ rdzogs rim khrid yig thabs grol gyi man ngag gi yig cha rnam mdzod chen rnam pa lnga yi ya gyal bka' brgyud sngags mdzod chen po rgyab rten dang bcas pa sogs la bzhugs su gsol la/ 'dir man ngag gnad kyi nying khu zab mo gdams ngag mdzod du ji ltar bzhugs/." 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, *gDams ngag mdzod*, vol. 7 (n.p.: Lama Ngodrup and Sherab Drimey, 1979–81), 3, Buddhist Digital Resource Center, bdr: MW20877.

[4]. Cécile Ducher, "A Lineage in Time: The Vicissitudes of the rNgog pa bka' brgyud from the eleventh through nineteenth centuries" (PhD diss., École pratique des hautes études, 2017); and Cécile Ducher, "The Treasury of Kagyü Mantra: A Nineteenth-Century Collection of Marpa's Tantric Teachings," in *Reasons and Lives in Buddhist Traditions: Studies in Honor of Matthew Kapstein*, ed. Dan Arnold, Cécile Ducher, and Pierre-Julien Harter (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2019), 127–39.

[5]. Tsadra Foundation, Tibetan Collections, [https://dnz.tsadra.org/index.php/Main\\_Page](https://dnz.tsadra.org/index.php/Main_Page).

[6]. Shambhala Publications, "Explore the Treasury of Precious Instructions," <https://www.shambhala.com/treasury-of-precious-instructions/>.

[7]. For 84000, see <https://84000.co/>; for the Khyentse Vision Project, see <https://www.khyentsevision.org/>.

[8]. *bdag nyid bcom ldan 'das 'khor lo bde mchog*. 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, *gDams ngag mdzod (DNZ)*, vol. 7, 135.

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