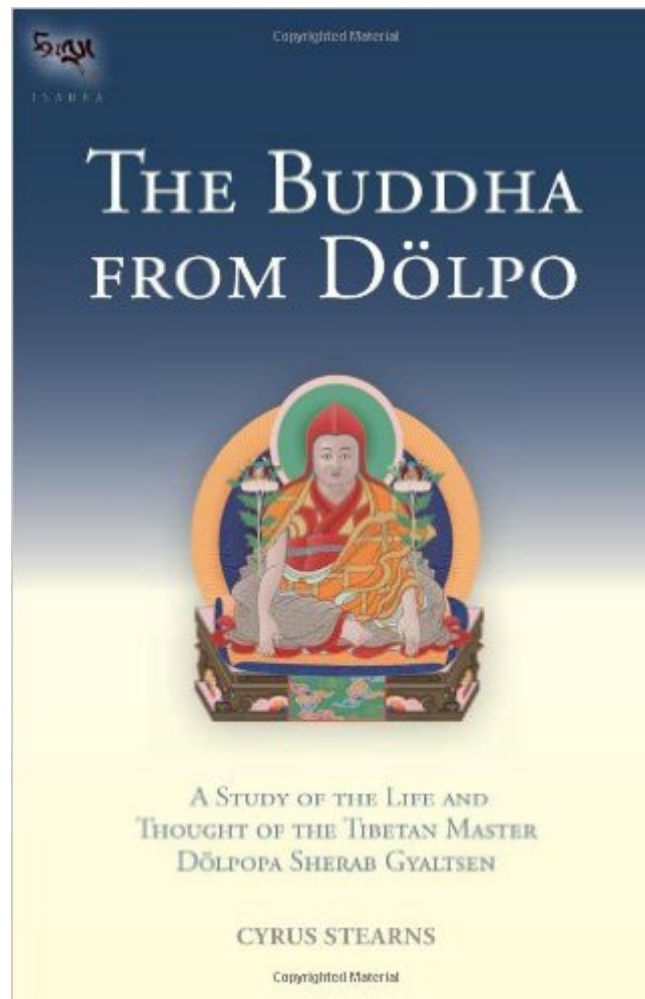


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The Buddha From Dolpo: A Study Of The Life And Thought Of The Tibetan Master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (Tsadra)



Synopsis

The Buddha from Dāṅlpo is a revised and enlarged edition of the only book about the most controversial Buddhist master in the history of Tibet, Dāṅlpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (1292–1361), who became perhaps the greatest Tibetan expert of the Kalacakra or Wheel of Time, a vast system of tantric teachings. Based largely on esoteric Buddhist knowledge from the legendary land of Shambhala, Dāṅlpopa's insights have profoundly influenced the development of Tibetan Buddhism for more than 650 years. Dāṅlpopa emphasized two contrasting definitions of the Buddhist theory of emptiness. He described relative phenomena as empty of self-nature, but absolute reality as only empty of other (i.e. relative) phenomena. He further identified absolute reality as the buddha nature or eternal essence present in all living beings. This view of an "emptiness of other," known in Tibetan as shentong, is Dāṅlpopa's enduring legacy. The Buddha from Dāṅlpo contains the only English translations of three of Dāṅlpopa's crucial works. A General Commentary on the Doctrine is one of the earliest texts in which he systematically presented his view of the entire Buddhist path to enlightenment. The Fourth Council and its Autocommentary (which was not in the first edition of this book) were written at the end of his life and represent a final summation of his teachings. These translations are preceded by a detailed discussion of Dāṅlpopa's life, his revolutionary ideas, earlier precedents for the shentong view, his unique use of language, and the influence of his theories. The fate of his Jonang tradition, which was censored by the central Tibetan government in the seventeenth century but still survives, is also examined.

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Customer Reviews

This book had been on my wish list for some time, but I'm glad I waited until the 2nd edition was out to read it (and am surprised it hasn't been reviewed here before now). Cyrus Stearns has with obvious devotion to detail revised his original work substantially, and the result is a high quality academic yet eminently readable book. My 5 star rating isn't so much an opinion about Dolpopa's philosophical ideas - since their study can be helpful whether we agree with them or not - as an appreciation for the whole package Stearns presents (biography, history, and philosophy in a quality publication). For me these ideas are intellectually challenging, and the fact they have generally been considered outside the mainstream and provocative piques my interest. However they may be a bit dry and academic for the casual reader, and over the head of someone not familiar with basics of Yogacara and Madhyamaka philosophy and Tibetan commentary, and I confess that as I get older I find I have less patience for all the intricacies Tibetan Buddhists endlessly debate about the "Two Truths", and in fact would rather hear about the old Chan formulation of "3 truths" (the relative, absolute and their nonduality), or even more, the intuitive experiential (and outrageous) Dzogchen dismissal of it all as being just "2 lies" from the point of view of primordial awareness. The 14th century Dolpopa seems like a fascinating individual, innovative, independent, even audacious, and his contribution to Tibet's spiritual traditions while widespread is not widely known and acknowledged today (and the fact that we are still talking about him almost 700 years later as THE main exemplar of independent thinking within Tibet is all the more remarkable!). I like his ideas, for their bold contrary flavor that challenged the accepted doctrines of his day, but while I may agree with some of his interpretations, it's really not my main concern which ideas and doctrines are more correct than others. Personally it's easy to glibly think they are all wrong to some degree (since they are all mental constructs), but my hunch is that Dolpopa is correct, and our inherent Buddha Nature IS complete, pure, unconditioned, luminous and ever present (and not just a potential viable seed stored in our minds somehow...which the slow and steady gradualists would have us believe, nor a quaint poetic metaphor for a bland emptiness as the Prasangikas maintain), and that nonduality means just that, and that it is simply our habitual obscurations that prevent our direct experience of it (and that an intellectual understanding, no matter how accurate, isn't going to remove these obscurations one bit). Dolpopa's radical contribution to Tibetan Buddhism is that he openly taught that relative truth is referring to phenomena that doesn't actually exist, while absolute truth does exist in and of itself, and is really all that exists (the first part agrees with orthodoxy, the second is

the heretical part). As Stearns points out, "To say that there are no phenomena other than the basic space of phenomena (dharmadhatu) is equivalent to saying that there are no phenomena other than nondual primordial awareness" (p. 96). Although this naturally leads into the more experiential views essential to the practice of deity yoga, Mahamudra and Dzogchen, Dolpopa's ideas in the sutrayana context of Buddha Nature and the Two Truths, while agreeing with a small stream of other masters throughout Tibetan history, were unorthodox and unacceptable to the majority in the reformed (Sarma) schools, especially after the Geluk sect became politically dominant in the mid 17th century and tried to impose a rather strict and uniform version of orthodoxy. Stearns' mostly focuses on the Sakya and Kagyu school's reaction since they interacted the most with Dolpopa's Jonang tradition, but it's a bit unclear (not addressed in much detail) how these ideas were received by the Nyingma (old school). It is clear that Dolpopa didn't agree that Mahamudra or Dzogchen 'nature of mind' teachings were complete (Dolpopa's preferred method for enlightenment was the Six-branch Yoga of the Kalachakra Tantra - which as Stearns briefly describes it sounds like a mix of Dzogchen's *togyal/trekchod* practices and the 6 Yogas of Naropa type tantric practices), yet the Nyingma's view in regard to pointing out the 'nature of mind' in Dzogchen is very similar sounding to Dolpopa's interpretation of absolute truth (if interested see *Mipam on Buddha-Nature: The Ground of the Nyingma Tradition*). The subtleties can get confusing! However, if one thing is clear from the various schools of Buddhism in Tibet it's that mixing traditions, and trying to reconcile differences casually, is generally NOT helpful to one's actual practice. (The 19th century nonsectarian Rime movement was not about a blending or "crossover" in the modern American sense, as about the three underdog schools collecting and preserving the diversity of their various traditions - keeping them distinct and alive.) Clearly Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen was a remarkable master, and Stearns does an excellent job of presenting his life and teachings without it becoming overly complex, moreover Dolpopa's insightful criticisms are well worth considering for any serious student of Madhyamaka and Tathagatagarbha. As Stearns says in his intro, "He (Dolpopa) often remarked that the majority of buddhas and bodhisattvas agree with him on these issues, but that the majority of scholars in Tibet oppose him." This book reveals a controversial, provocative and creative side of normally conservative Tibetan culture, rarely seen, and does so through a wide range of material - biography of Dolpopa (p. 9-40), history of the shentong tradition (p. 41-83), doctrine of Dolpopa (p. 85-110), and original translations of Dolpopa's texts and autocommentaries (p. 113-311), as well as extensive end notes (p. 313-411) and bibliographies (p. 413-437). Overall this book makes a fascinating intro to his life, and his somewhat heretical "shentong" view of emptiness - highly recommended.

This is a masterful work on a tradition of Tibetan Buddhism that has been largely overlooked by Western scholars in the past. Perhaps this is because the Jonang tradition, based in the practice and view of the Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) Tantra, was severely suppressed in the 17th Century by the Central Tibetan government and monastic hierarchy, because it did not match their prescribed view of the Buddhist teachings. But the Jonang tradition survived, and is a strong force again today, particularly in Eastern Tibet and among many exiled Buddhist teachers. It is based in the teachings of Buddha Nature as the fundamental nature of all beings, and the inherent qualities associated with the realization of that nature. Cyrus Stearn's translations and commentaries are masterful, and portray the brilliance of the great Jonangpa master Dolpopa with grace, depth and clarity.

Excellent book. Will buy again from this seller who was very prompt with delivery.

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