



**HAL**  
open science

# [Recension] The Gathering of Intentions: A History of a Tibetan Tantra

Matthew Kapstein

► **To cite this version:**

Matthew Kapstein. [Recension] The Gathering of Intentions: A History of a Tibetan Tantra. Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 2017. halshs-02503279

**HAL Id: halshs-02503279**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02503279>**

Submitted on 9 Mar 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

*The Gathering of Intentions: A History of a Tibetan Tantra.* By Jacob P. Dalton. Columbia University Press, 2016. 246 pages. \$60.00 (hardcover), \$59.99 (e-book).

Jacob Dalton's new book, *The Gathering of Intentions*, which began life as the author's University of Michigan doctoral dissertation in 2002, presents a useful companion to his earlier book, *The Taming of the Demons: Violence and Liberation in Tibetan Buddhism* (Yale University Press, 2011). In that work, Dalton examined the important role of themes relating to "demon taming" in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. Central to his narrative was the myth of the demon Rudra, whose most elaborate version, translated by Dalton in an appendix to *The Taming of the Demons*, is derived from a little known and puzzling scripture of Tibetan esoteric Buddhism entitled *The Sūtra of the Gathering of Intentions* (*Mdo dgongs-pa 'dus-pa*; hereinafter *The Gathering*). The book reviewed here seeks to situate that text, which appeared at some point during the last two centuries of the first millennium, in its specific ritual and doctrinal contexts in the history of the Nyingmapa order of Tibetan Buddhism, to whose tantric canon *The Gathering* belongs. Dalton begins his account with what is known in regard to the origins of *The Gathering* and traces its course down to the present day. The story he relates is based on admirably thorough research on a sprawling and mostly unstudied body of Tibetan doctrinal, ritual, and historical literature.

*The Gathering* is the major scripture of a particular tantric system called Anuyoga, and at the same time it is a main source for the general architecture of Nyingmapa Buddhism. This is based on a typology of nine progressive "vehicles" (the "nine *yānas*"), of which the Anuyoga is counted as the eighth (32–40). Just what "Anuyoga" (literally, "subsequent yoga") means in this context is not entirely clear, however, for although later Nyingmapa Buddhism identifies this with contemplative exercises focusing on the energies of the subtle body, such innovations in Buddhist tantra played no clear role in the system of *The Gathering*. Closely associated with the introduction and promulgation of *The Gathering* is a particularly puzzling, though certainly historical, figure of late ninth- and early tenth-century Tibet, Nupchen Sangyé Yeshé (chap. 2), to whom a two-volume commentary, entitled *Armor Against Darkness*, is attributed. This work appears to have disappeared from circulation by the beginning of the eighteenth century at the latest, but was recovered in the early twentieth century under circumstances that Dalton entertainingly recounts (124–28).

One of the stranger aspects of the history of *The Gathering* is the claim that it is not supposed to have been translated into Tibetan from Sanskrit, but first into the Burushaski language of what is today northern Pakistan and only subsequently into Tibetan (4–7). This oddity already attracted the attention of the early twentieth-century Orientalist Berthold Laufer, and, though Dalton is aware of Laufer's research, I do not think that he sufficiently weighs the implications of the problem in respect to *The Gathering's* origins, for he seems content to state that certain non-Tibetan vocabulary occurring in a part of the text is "Burushaski" without ever rigorously assessing whether or not there is any

plausible relationship between the words in question and this language. Moreover, as R. A. Stein suggests, one of the supposed translators of the work from Burushaski, named Chetsenkyé, may perhaps be identified with a similarly named adherent of the Bon religion, who is presumed to have lived during the late tenth century, a further problem for Dalton's dating of the text. Dalton does not refer to Stein's argument on this particular point.

In sum, therefore, while I do not wish to exclude the possibility that some parts of *The Gathering* had appeared as early as the ninth century, it seems to me probable that its final redaction took place sometime later. Dalton does not, in my view, adequately dispel doubts in regard to whether or not the great commentary attributed to Nupchen Sangyé Yeshé is to be considered the unique work of that figure, rather than perhaps a work elaborated within his clan over a period of several generations. In this context, I must note, too, that Dalton incorrectly ascribes to me the opinion that *The Gathering* itself may be a product of the eleventh century (151). I have never held this at all. My suggestion, rather, pertained only to Nupchen's commentary, or perhaps the final redaction thereof.

Although I am not, therefore, altogether convinced by Dalton's treatment of the early history of *The Gathering*, in the chapters that follow Dalton moves to more solid historical ground. He traces the proliferation of lineages, from the eleventh century on, in which *The Gathering* was transmitted and the elaboration, beginning in about the fourteenth century, of detailed manuals of the intricate system of initiation it involved (chaps. 3–4). The two chapters that follow trace the seventeenth-century rise of the two major Central Tibetan Nyingmapa monastic traditions, those of Dorjé Drak and Mindröling, in which the initiatory system of *The Gathering* achieved its modern forms. In his notes on all these sections Dalton performs an invaluable service for Tibetanists through his detailed citation of the generally unknown literature on which his account is based.

Dalton's final, seventh chapter focuses on the development of the Nyingmapa order in far eastern Tibet (Kham) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rediscovery of *The Gathering* by Katok Situ, one of the foremost eastern Tibetan teachers (124–26), and the creation of an expanded commentarial tradition on the text by one of the latter's successors, Khenpo Nüden (126–28). The chapter concludes by tracing the legacy of these figures in the continuing role of *The Gathering* in the Nyingmapa order at the present time, in exile in India. An appendix to the book surveys the major canonical scriptures of the Anuyoga.

Readers should note that the actual importance of *The Gathering* in Tibetan religious life has been modest. One can readily list textual and ritual systems of Tibetan Buddhism that enjoy greater prominence, are more broadly diffused, or have been demonstrably more influential. For these reasons, however, it would be a more difficult task to write concise historical portraits of them, as Dalton has successfully done here. Indeed, one of the main contributions of his book may be as a case study exemplifying what the biography of a particular Tibetan religious tradition might look like. In approaching a single ritual corpus diachronically, as he does, Dalton underscores, perhaps without quite intending to do so, a

particularly notable challenge for the study of Tibetan religion: to clarify the identity and distinguishing features of the many particular systems of doctrine and practice in Tibet, their fundamental roles in the constitution of Tibetan religious life, and the social-historical reasons for which Tibetans have continuously valued such diversity despite repeated attempts at synthesis. As Dalton shows us, *The Gathering*, specific to a particular tradition though it is, in fact represents one such attempt, first forged over a thousand years ago, and repeatedly redeployed down to the present day.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfx009

Advance Access publication March 11, 2017

Matthew T. Kapstein  
École Pratique des Hautes Études  
and The University of Chicago

*How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture.* By David Lambert. Oxford University Press, 2016. 280 pages. \$74.00 (hardcover), \$58.39 (e-book).

*Winner of the AAR's 2016 Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion: Textual Studies*

In *How Repentance Became Biblical: Judaism, Christianity, and the Interpretation of Scripture*, David Lambert comprehensively investigates the idea of repentance in the Hebrew Bible, in addition to those biblical rites, exhortations, and narratives that have frequently been interpreted as evidence for a thoroughgoing concept of individual penitence in Israelite religion. In short, Lambert's convincing intervention is to argue that that which is read as penitential in biblical texts—that is, intending to change the hearts and minds of ancient followers of the Israelite God—can alternatively be read as being materially effective in the realms beyond the individual: the community, and the community's relationship with God. To these ends, Lambert takes three approaches: to identify the “ontological underpinnings” of “dominant penitential modes of reading the Bible”; to provide “alternative readings of so-called penitential phenomena”; and to provide a genealogy of “a discourse around repentance” that developed through and after the biblical eras (10). Specifically, Lambert focuses on a wide range of texts that have typically been read as calling for or effecting personal repentance, from fasting, prayer, confession, and prophecy, along with apocalyptic expectations in the Late Second Temple period. Lambert argues “that there was a time before repentance” (10) and that a concerted exploration of alternatives to repentance will expand our understanding of the material, literary, narrative, and philosophical forms of biblical expression. This volume is a valuable resource for specialists and interested scholars alike for rethinking fundamental assumptions about the origins of penitence, including the rituals of fasting and mourning, and the exhortations of the prophets.