

*Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in Renaissance Tibet.* By Christopher Hatchell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 471. ISBN 10: 0199982910; ISBN 13: 978-0-19-998291-2.

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This work is perhaps the first of its kind to explore Tibetan Buddhist practices that employ the act of seeing, looking, staring, or even not-seeing anything at all. This book speaks of metaphorical and actual seeing and it is argued that, in a number of Tibetan traditions, the eyes are considered to be ways to a transcendent form of seeing, thus moving beyond their metaphorical importance. It is not difficult to see the appeal of such a topic to prospective readers. *Naked Seeing* is a veritable *tour de force* of previously under- and unexplored Tibetan textual material from the so-called Tibetan Renaissance period. The author notes that this period was said to start in the late tenth century, thereby equating it with the later dissemination of Buddhist teachings in Tibet (Tib. *phyi dar*), but does not expand upon the periodization of this “later dissemination”. While the usage of the term “renaissance” is not uncontested, most historians agree that this period ended with the rise of the Sa skya-Mongol alliance in the thirteenth century.

The book consists of three parts: the first discusses the literature, the second analyses the views discussed therein, and the final part contains translations of the three Tibetan language works discussed. The introductory section (pp. 1–18) – aside from giving the obligatory contextualization on the Tibetan renaissance, Tantra, and philosophy – entices the reader by speaking of the themes of dark and light and the role of seeing in Tibetan literature and religious practices. Hatchell’s overall objective is to understand how vision “served as a meeting point for a discussion between three very different traditions” (p. 16), while not attempting to locate a single origin. The three main sources that are used are Yumo Mikyö Dorje’s (Yu mo mi bskyod rdo rje) *Lamp Illuminating Emptiness* (*sTong nyid gsal sgron*), *The Advice on the Six Lamps* (*sGron ma drug gi gdams pa*) and its commentary by Drugyalwa (Bru sgom rgyal ba g.yung drung), and *The Tantra of the Blazing Lamps* (*sGron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud*). The first text, the *Lamp Illuminating Emptiness* is classed as a Kālacakra treatise, the latter two are Great Perfection (rDzogs chen) texts. While *The Advice on the Six Lamps* is a Bon text (from the literary cycle of the *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud*), *The Tantra of the Blazing Lamps* is one of the so-called seventeen *rDzogs chen* tantras (*man ngag sde*) as found in the Nyingma (*rNying ma*) tradition. The author of this book presents the respective backgrounds of the three works and their place in the different traditions, largely following the Tibetan manner of presenting religious literature and authorship. This discussion comprises the first three chapters of the book.

The second part, i.e. chapters 4 to 6, is organized thematically, respectively called *Seeing Emptiness*, *Seeing Light*, and *Seeing through Sexuality*. The first of these chapters speculates on seeing in the dark and its connections with the Buddhist view regarding emptiness; in other words, how the various Buddhist traditions have dealt with reconciling the senses and emptiness. It is argued that the senses – and particularly the visual one – were employed in seeing, and realizing, emptiness. The fifth chapter deals with the themes of light and darkness as presented by the different texts. The author speaks of sky-gazing, entoptic phenomena, and dark-retreats. The last chapter in this section deals with the theme of sexual union in the presented texts. Most emphasis here is given to the five different uses and meanings of what Hatchell inconsistently calls *thig-le*. While this Tibetan term, as it is used in a variety of ways, is not easy to translate, the author chooses to leave it untranslated, while occasionally calling it “seminal nuclei” and sometimes the Sanskrit *bindu*, meaning “spot”, “drop” or “particle”, which he claims has no sexual overtones. While this is not the place to discuss this term in much detail, this is clearly not correct. The last section of this chapter on the theme of sexuality as featured

in these three texts is called “Coming full circle” (pun intended?) in which it is concluded that not the act of sex itself, but the language of it, is what plays the biggest role in the presented literature.

The third part consists of complete translations of the discussed sections of the texts. The author has chosen not to include a philological apparatus, nor is there much (explanatory) annotation. This begs the question: who is meant to read these translations? The recommendation on the back cover states that this book would be well suited to people interested in the phenomenology of sensory perception. Be this as it may, I have found the translations to be difficult to understand even with knowledge of the underlying original Tibetan concepts. How, then, would this come across to a less specialized reader? For a “lay” audience what meaning, for example, does “the container world, its contained beings” (p. 243) or that “[s]ince beginningless time, we have cycled limitlessly” (p. 245) convey? If one opts not to present annotated translations, it appears to me that the alternative is to make the texts accessible and readable for a wider audience. It appears, however, that avoiding “translationese” is more challenging than providing a philological apparatus. In my opinion, the translations neither help in the understanding nor in the appreciation of this type of material.

The third and last text that is discussed and translated, *The Advice on the Six Lamps*, is famous within the Bon tradition. It comes therefore as no surprise that scholarship on this work already exists; it has been rather extensively treated by Blezer.<sup>1</sup> This work is only mentioned in the bibliography and not once referred to in the book itself, which is puzzling. However, more surprising is the fact that a part of this text has already been translated by Orofino, which has not been acknowledged at all.<sup>2</sup> Another academic contribution that is noticeably absent is Achard’s work from 2002 that contains concordances, an index, and a full transliteration of *The Six Lamps*.<sup>3</sup> One is left to wonder how such a work could be overlooked.

There is an overall unevenness about this book that manifests itself on a number of levels. There is the decision to translate some terms into English (gnostic seal, Complete Enjoyment Body), while leaving certain terms in Sanskrit, such as *bhaga* (which in the material presented here can be a synonym for the “Great Seal”, but which also simply means “vagina”) and *visarga*, and leaving yet others in Tibetan (Lopön Āryadeva, instead of Ācārya Āryadeva). Other terms are given alternately in English and Tibetan (e.g. seminal nuclei/*thig le*). Consistency requires that hard choices have to be made, or alternatively, that the choice not to choose is explained. In addition, there is no vocabulary list, which would have been useful in understanding some of the translation choices. The usage of the English presents another unevenness: on certain occasions the language is colloquial and even chummy, on others it is formal and obtuse. Furthermore, the book contains a number of typos and spelling mistakes in the Tibetan (e.g. p. 381, n. 13 *snying khu* for *nying khu*; p. 415, n. 20 *nya ngan* for *mya ngan*; p. 415, n. 18 *shang ba* for *snang ba*) as well as various editing mistakes in the prose.

The author writes that he travelled through India, Nepal, Tibet, and the United States to speak to heirs of the visionary traditions treated in the book (p. 147). And while Hatchell is convinced that these traditions are still alive today, it is a pity that next to no mention of these contemporary practices is given in the book. The premise of this book, to explore Tibetan religious literature by shining some light on religious visual practices, is interesting enough, but the reader is left in the dark along the way. *Naked Seeing* will undoubtedly be of use to those who have a keen interest in Great Perfection and Kālacakra literature – although the academics might want to keep the original Tibetan texts at hand, along with a good dose of perseverance.

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- 1 Henk Blezer, “‘Light’ on the Human Body: The Coarse Physical Body and Its Functions in the Aural Transmission from the Zhang Zhung on the Six Lamps,” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines* 23 (2012), pp. 117–68.
  - 2 Giacomella Orofino, *Sacred Tibetan Teachings on Death and Liberation: Texts from the Most Ancient Traditions of Tibet* (Bridport: Prism, 1990 [1985 Italian original]).
  - 3 Jean-Luc Achard, *Concordance des instructions sur les Six Lampes (sGron-ma drug gi gdams-pa) de Tapihritsa: Etablissement du texte tibétain, translittération, concordance et index* (Textes du Zhang-zhung snyan-rgyud, volume II, pdf; Khyung-mkhar, 2002).