

Longing to Awaken: Buddhist Devotion in Tibetan Poetry and Song

Edited by Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend

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An Anthology of the Heart, Bridging Worlds: Exploring
Devotion Through Tibetan Poetry and Song in *Longing to Awaken*

Longing to Awaken: Buddhist Devotion in Tibetan Poetry and Song, edited by Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend, and published by the University of Virginia Press (2024), is a noteworthy collection of Tibetan poetry and song that delves into the multifaceted nature of devotion within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Going beyond a simple presentation of translated works, Gayley and Townsend provide a bridge for readers to access the heart of Tibetan Buddhist practice, presenting both original Tibetan texts and accessible English translations. In doing so, they invite a broader audience to engage with the profound spiritual longing, the nuanced philosophical underpinnings, and the vibrant cultural expressions embedded within these devotional pieces. The editors are to be lauded for their meticulous scholarship and commitment to presenting a diverse array of voices, spanning centuries and various schools of thought within Tibetan Buddhism. This collection is an excavation and illumination of the power of poetry as a lived experience and a conduit for spiritual practice, inspiration, and realization.

The “Editorial Introduction” deftly explores the complexities of Buddhist devotion, differentiating it from mere blind faith by highlighting the importance of discernment and critical inquiry. An interview with Jetsün Khandro Rinpoché is a standout feature, offering a practitioner’s perspective that skillfully grounds the academic discussion in lived experience. The section titled “An Act of Bardo: Translating Tibetan Poetry” is particularly valuable, as it directly addresses the inherent challenges in translating poetry across languages and cultures. This section offers a nuanced exploration of the complexities of translation. The anthology comprises twenty-five carefully selected poems and songs. A detailed List of Contributors and a comprehensive Index conclude the book, enhancing its usability for researchers. Each chapter meticulously presents the original Tibetan text alongside its English translation, facilitating a deeper engagement with the source material.

The translated pieces showcase a diverse spectrum of devotional sentiments and expressions, and the editors made a deliberate and commendable choice to include works from both well-known figures such as Milarepa, Longchenpa, and Jigmé Lingpa, and lesser-known or marginalized voices, including female Buddhist figures like Yeshé Tsogyal, Sera Khandro, and Mingyur Peldrön. This inclusion serves to expand the traditional canon and challenge conventional narratives within Tibetan Buddhist Studies, acknowledging the vital contributions of women often overlooked in historical accounts. The poems and songs delve into a range of themes central to Tibetan Buddhist thought and practice: the profound guru-disciple relationship, the ever-present awareness of impermanence, the ardent longing for enlightenment, the acceptance of death, and the transformative power of love and compassion. The anthology also incorporates less conventional pieces,

such as Khangsar Tenpé Wangchuk's "The Non-Song," which challenges readers to reconsider conventional notions of devotional expression.

One of the greatest strengths of *Longing to Awaken* lies in the meticulous care with which the editors have curated and presented the translated works. Each poem or song is accompanied by an insightful introduction that provides historical context, biographical information, and a discussion of key themes and literary devices, thus serving as invaluable guides for readers unfamiliar with Tibetan Buddhist literature. The inclusion of original poems and songs allows readers with knowledge of Tibetan to engage with the original language and appreciate the nuances of poetry. Furthermore, the book's successful balance between scholarly rigor and accessible language, alongside its clear organization, makes it a valuable resource for both academic scholars and general readers interested in exploring Tibetan Buddhist culture and spirituality.

Longing to Awaken resonates with the spirit of groundbreaking collections such as *Women Writing in India* (Volumes I and II), edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, which seeks to unearth and amplify marginalized voices within a specific cultural context. Gayley and Townsend mirror Tharu and Lalitha by demonstrating a commitment to expanding the literary canon and challenging traditional narratives. While *Women Writing in India* focuses specifically on women's voices across a span of 2400 years, *Longing to Awaken* adopts a broader thematic approach, exploring the multifaceted nature of devotion across various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. *Longing to Awaken* also builds upon the work of scholars such as Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik, who have examined the role of women in Tibetan Buddhism, and by including works by female poets and practitioners, Gayley and Townsend contribute

to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the tradition. *Longing to Awaken* could serve as a valuable supplementary text in courses on Tibetan Buddhism, religious studies, and comparative literature.

Acknowledging the inherent limitations of any curated collection is essential for a balanced critique. While *Longing to Awaken* offers a diverse selection of poems and songs, the very act of selection inevitably reflects the editors' own choices and perspectives. Readers deeply invested in specific lineages, such as the Sakya or Jonang schools, or time periods might find that their areas of interest are not as comprehensively represented as others. While the anthology includes works from the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism, other less prominent lineages receive comparatively less attention. The editors provide valuable historical background information for each piece, but a more sustained analysis of the dynamic interplay between devotional expression and broader social forces would have deepened the book's critical engagement with the material. Another potential avenue for expansion lies in the inclusion of more contemporary voices. While the collection does feature some works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the majority of the selections are drawn from earlier periods. Incorporating a greater number of contemporary poems and songs would provide readers with a more complete understanding of how devotion is expressed in Tibetan Buddhism today, reflecting the evolving nature of the tradition.

Beyond its role as a collection of translated works, *Longing to Awaken* also serves as a catalyst for critical reflection on the very essence of devotion. The editors' framing of devotion as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing both unwavering faith

and discerning wisdom, is a particularly insightful approach. By emphasizing the importance of critical inquiry, personal experience, and the role of doubt, the anthology moves beyond simplistic notions of devotion as blind adherence to dogma. The inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives further underscores the fluidity and adaptability of devotional expression within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The poems and songs in this collection reveal that devotion is not a static or monolithic concept, but rather a dynamic and evolving process shaped by individual experiences, cultural contexts, and historical circumstances. Further critical analysis could explore the power dynamics inherent in the guru-disciple relationship, a recurring theme in many of the poems. How do these poems negotiate the delicate balance between reverence and autonomy? How do they address the potential for abuse of power within these relationships? These are important questions to consider when engaging with this material. The anthology also raises thought-provoking questions about the relationship between language, translation, and religious experience. The act of translating poetry across languages and cultures inevitably involves a degree of interpretation, transformation, and even loss. The editors have well acknowledged these challenges and provided readers with the tools to critically assess the translations, prompting reflection on the nature of transmission and interpretation.

To conclude, *Longing to Awaken* holds the potential to exert a considerable influence on the field of Tibetan Buddhist Studies, and by making these previously inaccessible poems and songs available to a wider audience, the anthology will undoubtedly stimulate further research and discussion on the multifaceted topic of devotion. While no collection is without its limitations, the strengths of this book far outweigh

any perceived shortcomings, making it a must-read for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and the transformative power of devotion. This book could also serve as a valuable model for future anthologies that seek to explore the diverse expressions of religious experience across cultures and traditions, promoting cross-cultural understanding and fostering dialogue between different spiritual paths. *Longing to Awaken* is a book that will resonate long after the final page is turned, inviting readers to contemplate the nature of longing, the meaning of devotion, and the path to awakening.

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