

*Gyatso Janet, Being human in a Buddhist world. An  
intellectual history of medicine in early modern Tibet*

New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, x + 519 pages,  
ISBN 978-0-231-16496-2

Per Kværne

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- 1 Occasionally a book appears which has a lasting impact, irrevocably altering our way of perceiving a given field of research. In Tibetan studies, one such book is R.-A. Stein, *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* (Paris, 1959), which by its unique erudition and multi-faceted approach to the Gesar epic not only established this vast corpus of oral as well as written literature as a central concern in Tibetan studies, but deeply influenced the perception of Tibetan history and culture in the wider context of Central Asia. A work of similar importance is D. L. Snellgrove, *The nine ways of Bon. Excerpts from gZi-brjid* (London, 1967), which represented a paradigmatic shift in the understanding of the Bön religion, initiating a development which continues today as a rapidly expanding field of research, and, in a wider context, continually changing our perspective on the early as well as later religious and cultural history of Tibet.
- 2 Janet Gyatso's book is, in my opinion, of the same order. It is immensely learned and at the same time accessible for a wide audience. It is by no means necessary to be engaged in Tibetan studies to become fascinated by it ; it is, in fact, what is called 'a good read'. It is handsomely produced and lavishly illustrated, which certainly is no drawback at a time when works of excellent scholarship are too often marred by fuzzy illustrations

reproduced in appallingly unattractive shades of grey. The significance of *Being human in a Buddhist world* is, however, of course to be found in its contents. It brings to the fore an aspect of Tibetan cultural and intellectual history that has been at best unacknowledged, and in fact widely unknown, viz. the emergence, in the course of the generations immediately preceding the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, of an approach to medicine primarily based – and here I drastically simplify the author’s argument – on empirical observation rather than scriptural authority. Such attempts, however tentative, to circumvent scriptural authority was not, of course, uncontested, and gave rise to a lively and occasionally acrimonious debate.

- 3 In a series of brilliant chapters, which to some extent can be read as independent essays, Gyatso traces this development in detail, based on a careful reading of a large number of texts (most of them hitherto little studied, if at all) and providing numerous passages in translation, as well as a sharp-eyed scrutiny of the “medical thankas” commissioned by the regent Sangye Gyatso and edited and published in a sumptuous volume by Anthony Aris in 1992 (*Tibetan medical paintings*, 2 vols., London, 1992).
- 4 Among the themes dealt with by Gyatso, are questions such as women and the specificity of the female body ; female illness and women’s medicine ; the importance accorded to human happiness (including sexuality) in a ‘secular’, down-to-earth sense by some Tibetan medical philosophers ; and, as already indicated, the testing of borders between observation and experience on the one hand and Buddhist scriptural authority on the other by a number of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan scholars.
- 5 The author is careful to point out that the beginnings of an empirical and, in a sense, pre-modern approach to knowledge in the end did not, in Tibet, develop into a full-fledged scientific mode of understanding the world as it ultimately did in the West. Nevertheless, the progress made in that direction by a number of Tibetan scholars in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was by no means negligible, and the confrontation between empirical and scriptural authority was, as Gyatso documents, sometimes bitter, although often veiled in philosophical or mythological terms, just as it was, for a long time, in the West.
- 6 This reviewer, for one, hopes that the thrust of Janet Gyatso’s book will not only be a powerful pointer to a hitherto under-communicated aspect of Tibetan culture, still widely perceived (and even occasionally praised) in the West as “anti-modern”, being – it is claimed – basically “spiritual” and “Dharma-oriented”, but also, and more importantly, serve to encourage those Tibetans who seek to understand their own history and culture independently of currently construed and officially promoted narratives, whether inspired by Buddhism or by Marxism, both in Tibet itself and in the Tibetan exile community.

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AUTHORS

PER KVÆRNE