

Ordinary Wisdom: Sakya Pandita's Treasury of Good Advice

Translated by John T. Davenport, with
Sallie D. Davenport and
Losang Thonden,
Foreword by H.H. Sakya Trizin,
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For those who have little or no idea about the *Sakya Legshe* (saskya legs bshad) or the *Treasury of Good Advice* and its author, some background information is provided herein. Tibetan Buddhism is divided into four principal schools: the Nyingma, Kagyu, Geluk, and Sakya. The last school, the Sakya, was founded in 1073 with the establishment of the Sakya monastery by Khön Gönchok Gyalpo. Within this tradition arose one of the great scholars of the tradition, Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltsen Pal Zangpo (1182-1251), considered the sixth patriarch of the Sakya school, the fourth of the five great masters of the Sakya tradition, and certainly the foremost lama at the time. Because of his reputation, Sakya Pandita was invited to the court of the Mongolian ruler, Godan Khan, who converted to Buddhism and became his disciple because of the impression Sakya Pandita made and because of his curing the prince of an illness. This visit not only led to the ruler's conversion but also allayed a threatened invasion of Tibet by the Mongolians. Later, it was Sakya Pandita's nephew, Chogyal Pakpa (1235-1280), who received from Qubilai Khan the temporal power over Tibet and enhanced religious prestige of the head of the Sakya School. The system established was the "patron-priest" relationship, wherein Pakpa and his successors became the spiritual preceptors of the khans in return for the military backing by the Khan's providing protection to the lamas and to Tibet. Thus, from 1245 to 1358, the heads of the Sakya School were virtual rulers of Tibet.

The temporal and religious importance of Sakya Pandita ultimately rested on his considerable learning. Indeed, the epithet Sakya Pandita (Sanskrit *paṇḍita*:- *adj.*, "learned"; *n.*, "scholar") may be translated as the "Scholar among the Sakyas." In his capacity as a learned lama, Sakya Pandita wrote this very practical guide of 457 verses for the lay person exhorting the reader to avoid all harmful acts that are motivated by greed, hatred, and delusion and to take responsibility in one's own conduct toward others, all in accordance with the underlying reality of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all humans—indeed of all sentient beings.

The method of introducing this teaching is not through some theoretical treatise but through the medium of the down to earth wisdom reflecting that body of Sanskrit literature known as the *nītiśāstra*—works on morals and politics—and the use of *subhāṣita*-s, eloquent or well-spoken speech that counsel the individual. Indeed, the *Sakya Legshe*, according to the translators, represents "the first and an original Tibetan expression of the *subhāṣita* form of traditional Indian *nītiśāstra* literature—'eloquent sayings' about secular affairs in daily human life (1). The result is a highly readable collection that provides insights not only in how one should conduct oneself but also in understanding Tibetan culture and thought. Although considered a secular work, one of the few in Tibetan literature (8), the *Sakya Legshe* most certainly is written in accordance with Buddhist teaching. In the words of the Head of the Sakya Order, H.H. Sakya Trizin:

"From a Buddhist perspective, sentient beings are trapped within the imaginings of their own minds, creating for themselves a lifetime of tribulation, ranging from minor annoyances to extreme suffering. This entrapment is due not to some permanent defect in the ultimate nature of mind; rather,

the mind is defiled by disturbing emotions, which are in fact removable..."

In the light of this statement, I would suggest that the descriptive "secular" for this work is slightly misleading. It is a work directly primarily to non-monastics but written within the context of the Buddhist Dharma. If the translator chooses to employ the term in this context, then I would agree. I would rather describe as a practical compendium and guide to right living and dispense with the sacred-secular dichotomy.

In addition to the translation of the *Sakya Legshe*, a modern (1972) commentary, *A Hive Where Gather Bees of Clear Understanding*, by Sakya Khenpo Sangyay Tenzin is included, thereby adding considerable understanding and substance to the primary text. The division of chapters is in accordance with the subject matter of the verses: Chapter 1, entitled "An Examination of the Wise" followed by eight chapters, all beginning with "An Examination of..." but ending with different qualifiers: the Noble, the Foolish, both the Wise and Foolish, Bad Conduct, Natural Tendencies, Unseemly Tendencies, Deeds, and Dharma. A sampling of the verses demonstrate their universal appeal:

*Learning entails hardship;
Living at ease, one cannot
become wise.
Due to attachment to small
pleasures
One cannot attain great
happiness (vs. 24)*

*Willingly accepting contempt
from the mean-spirited
To whom they have given good
advice that goes unpracticed
And not forgetting even small
favors bestowed on them
Are superb distinguishing
features of extraordinary people
(vs. 41).*

*As long as one maintains a sense
of shame,
One's personal qualities are like
the finest jewels;
But when shame is eclipsed, these
qualities
Become partial, and one's speech
coarsens (vs. 123).*

*Rare are those who say helpful
things;
Rarer still are those who listen.
Skillful doctors are hard to find,
But fewer are those who heed
their advice (vs. 169).*

Many more pearls of wisdom are given by this remarkably wise lama, some not as easily understood because of cultural differences and obscure literary references, but where there is lack of understanding of the verse, the commentary provides more than sufficient explanation to overcome any obstacle. Indeed, Sakya Khenpo Sangyay Tenzin's commentary provides a number of entertaining and instructive tales that illustrate the verse in question, examples being the story of Khavara (34f.); the boy Candra (41f.); the learned king of *Vārāṅasī*, *Mahārāja*, and his sons Subhartha and Papartha (61f.); the story of the rabbits and elephants (81f.); and the story of the Kings Candraprabha and Bhīmasena, an obvious Birth Story (*jātaka*) (94f.).

Besides the translation, there is an informative Introduction providing information on Sakya Pandita and the genre and background of the *Sakya Legshe*, endnotes, a helpful glossary, bibliography, and index.

In conclusion, this book is highly recommended to anyone interested in Buddhist ethical wisdom and Tibetan culture. It is also recommended for all academic libraries.

– James A. Santucci