
Review of *Being Human and a Buddha Too: Longchenpa's Seven Trainings for a Sunlit Sky*

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Anne Klein, *Being Human and a Buddha Too: Longchenpa's Seven Trainings for a Sunlit Sky*. Wisdom Publications, 2023. Pp. 258. Paper back \$19.95; eBook \$14.99. (9781614297772)

Being Human and a Buddha Too is a seemingly simple yet penetrating introduction to the all-encompassing wholeness of being. This wholeness constitutes the core teaching of the Great Completeness (Dzogchen), the epitome of all Buddhist paths for the ancient Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. As a comprehensive look at Tibetan Buddhist perspectives on mind and reality, this book will certainly yield helpful clarifications to philosophically-inclined scholars—however, it is first and foremost a practice manual for those who seek to pierce the mystery that guided the author's own journey within this wisdom tradition: How can one be at once human and a buddha too?

Anne Klein organizes her exploration of this question into three parts. The first presents a translation of the root text, Longchenpa's *Sevenfold Mind Training*, appended with her own clarification of its historical and philosophical contexts. The second consists of an oral commentary on the seven trainings by contemporary Tibetan master Adzom Paylo Rinpoche. In the third, Klein shares her reflections on the trainings, drawing on the commentary by Longchenpa's heart disciple Jigme Lingpa, other writings of Longchenpa, and insights from diverse traditions and fields of inquiry and knowledge, both ancient and modern. These various strands of thought and experience are artfully woven together through Klein's contemporary language, which helps bridge the gaps between the widely different times, places, and traditions upon which she draws. Klein's ability to draw connections between distant ideas and fields of knowledge enable her to introduce the esoteric practices of the Great Completeness to the reader in a direct and accessible manner.

The book is meant to be read slowly and applied in practice as the reader navigates its dense pages. The chapters are interspersed with "contemplative interludes" featuring Jigmé Lingpa's five pith practices—short meditation instructions distilling the intent of the seven trainings—and Klein's own guidance and contemplative exercises. Far from an intellectual presentation of Longchenpa's views, Klein thereby offers an experiential introduction to the Dzogchen master's "gnostic turns" (28). As mind training practices are generally considered elementary,



Longchenpa’s seven trainings likewise begin with the initiatory reflections on impermanence and karmic cause and effect. Yet, each of these reflections, belonging to what Klein calls the “karmic narrative” of Sūtra teachings, rapidly pivots toward a surrender to the all-embracing wakefulness of the Great Completeness teachings, revealing the tradition’s “wisdom narrative that runs like a river through all the trainings” (18). Leveraging Longchenpa’s other writings and Jigmé Lingpa’s take on the seven trainings, Klein thus gradually reveals for the reader the meaning of the confounding claim that, though human, we are buddhas too.

The author assists the contemporary reader through these gnostic insights by connecting them to a wide range of references from other wisdom traditions, such as Sufism, as well as modern sciences, including psychology, neurology, and biology, which all provide a broader perspective on the universality of mind and wisdom. Her references to infant brain development and sensory experience or the impact of physical surroundings on mental states and social interactions, for instance, provide concrete and relatable examples that illustrate the interface between mind, body, and environment, indicating the intrinsic entanglement of the internal and external worlds, and thus the ultimate Buddhist truth of nonduality. The wisdom narrative of the Great Completeness is precisely undergirded by the recognition of radical nonduality, which erases all separateness without denying difference. Returning to this theme throughout the book, Klein’s presentation of the Great Completeness as a path of wholeness and connection is a plea for us all to remember that “we are all the same in being different” (124). Though we may not all arrive at the final realization of the Great Completeness, these pages nevertheless hold an important message for our times, for, as Klein writes, “the seven trainings are for embracing unbounded benevolence toward all life” (12).

The author’s awareness and sensitivity to the contemporary context are also apparent in her delicate discussion of recent issues of abuse in Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, the seven trainings are suffused with guru yoga—which, as she notes, is the nature of all tantric Buddhist deity practices—and the question of the relationship with the guru may never have been so fraught. Decidedly not skirting the issue, Klein addresses past instances and the general possibility of abuse in a balanced, respectful, yet unapologetic manner. She at once maintains her own reverence for her teachers and their tradition while also acknowledging the potential for abuse in student-teacher relationships and the real harm that has already been caused. Her appraisal of the situation is complemented by nuanced advice on how to navigate the tantric injunction to see one’s teacher as a buddha at the same time as keeping a clear, critical eye on what constitutes a good teacher and what constitutes abuse. Her balanced tone and personal insights, as well as the compassion she extends to both victims of abuse and sincere seekers in need of a teacher, are welcome additions to the often one-sided responses that have emerged on this salient issue.

The work is composed in the manner of a practice manual—its purpose is to be experienced, integrated, and reflected upon. Though the ideas and materials are complex, Klein’s creative use of language throughout the book makes it an enjoyable read, a gentle tug to the rug under the feet of our dualistic thinking. Klein’s translations of the original Tibetan texts and terminology, in particular, stand out for their originality, directness, and poetics. As in her other works, she continues to steer clear of the beaten tracks of translation that often lead to rote repetitions, diluting the impact of words originally meant to strike right at the heart. Instead, the freshness of her translation choices prompts readers, no matter how familiar with Great Completeness terminology,

to reassess their understanding and approach even old ideas anew. The fact that she provides the original Tibetan in parentheses whenever she introduces a new translation choice anchors seasoned readers in these texts and traditions while opening new possibilities of understanding with a fresh take. Other translators of Tibetan Buddhist texts might also find that her terminology and style invite pause and reflection in our own practice of translation.

Given the caliber of the writing, I only deplore the number of typos and errors left in the published manuscript. For a text that is so careful in its use of language and that otherwise invites a smooth reading experience, the spelling and grammar mistakes found on most pages somewhat hamper that flow. It would have been worthwhile for Wisdom Publications to invest more in the book's copyediting—but this is a minor fault in an otherwise compelling read.

All in all, Anne Klein's work offers the unique perspective of a modern, female scholar-practitioner who is as intimately knowledgeable of the wisdom tradition she presents as she is of the challenges and opportunities of contemporary life. She continues to maintain a difficult balance between showing reverence for a tradition transmitted down the centuries and exercising critical awareness of the human factors that beset any given place and time. She also demonstrates the vast potential for finding resonances between Buddhism and the modern sciences, as well as other wisdom traditions, in a manner that enriches and complements our understanding of each. Above all, she speaks the modern reader's language, both literally and figuratively, weaving the ancient words of wisdom of Longchenpa and his followers seamlessly into the twenty-first century.