

## Contemporary oral histories of the *Kālacakratantra*

Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim

This paper discusses various ways in which the source of the *Kālacakra* is being presented in oral teachings. The paper focuses on two contemporary dGe-lugs masters operating in exile, the 14th Dalai Lama and Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche and compares their oral presentations with a number of textual sources. The paper argues that although oral presentations on the source of the *Kālacakratantra*

are very closely related to their textual sources, the deviations that do exist between them reflect the process of change which Tibetan Buddhism is presently undergoing in exile.

Teachings on the source of the *Kālacakra* tradition are recounted by masters conducting the *Kālacakra* initiation at the beginning of the ceremony. The accounts begin by relating to the source of the *Kālacakra* teachings, referring to the following questions: Who taught the *Kālacakra*? Where? To whom? What was taught? Why? The presentation on the origin of the teachings is then followed by an account of its dissemination in India and Tibet, leading up to the master who is teaching and conducting the initiation.

The exposition of the history of the tradition within the teachings themselves establishes their continuity. The exposition also establishes the authority of the teachings as well as the authority of the master himself. Establishing the authority of the master is achieved through the analogy of the Buddha with the guru, which is very central both to the teachings and to the initiation. The centrality of the guru is also what defines the need to state the lineage of the teaching, which usually starts from the Buddha and ends with the master who is giving the initiation. The lineage, the direct link with the Buddha, in whichever version it is given, is significant not necessarily in a historical sense, but as it closely relates to the possibility of enlightenment.

Analysing different oral versions of the source of the *Kālacakra* vis-à-vis their textual sources and their scholarly counterparts, brings about a concern with the different approaches to what is termed as “history” and what is termed as “myth”. In my paper I refer to three historiographical categories, each treating the lines between mythical/sacred/real in a different way.

The contemporary setting in which the oral presentations of the source of the teaching is presented, defines the way in which these accounts are constructed. A specific historical version, as De Certeau has argued, is a “product of a place”. In the case of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist historiography, the epistemic configurations, which define the construction of the various contemporary historical versions of the *Kālacakra*, are based on Buddhist ideas while being in dialogue with western notions as well. The analysis of

contemporary oral versions of the *Kālacakra*'s history, therefore, is relevant not only for the study of the history of the *Kālacakra*, but also as a reflection on contemporary Tibetan Buddhism and the contemporary dialogue it maintains in exile with western ideas and western-based scholarship.

In terms of the expositions of history from within the tradition, the way in which the history is represented at present is not just a re-statement of what has been written and stated in the past but is also taking into account the time and the place which the teachings are given, each master with his own "skill in means."

In the case of the 14th Dalai Lama, his oral presentations reveal an attempt to make his teachings relevant to a contemporary audience, both westerners and exiled Tibetans. With these aims in sight, the Dalai Lama has developed his unique interpretations, adhering to Buddhist principles whilst transforming issues which may seem problematic to western-based or western-inclined audience. The oral histories presented by Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche, on the other hand, are versions which are closer to their textual sources, yet still contain his own interpretations. Kirti Tsenshab views the co-existence between "real" and "myth" as not unique to Buddhist historiography, but as existing in a similar way in western-based histories. His view implies that he sees no problem in presenting a mixture of myth and history to western audiences. The main objective of Kirti Tsenshab's account on the source of the *Kālacakra* teachings is to provide authenticating elements of it, in order to enhance his students' motivation for receiving the *Kālacakra* initiation and later – practising the *Kālacakra* teachings.