

Preface

Among the “learned and accomplished masters” (*mkhas grub*) on the Tibetan plateau of the “long 15th century,” the First Karma ’phrin las pa stands out as an influential commentator on late Indian Buddhist poetry (Saraha’s *Dohā*), as a prolific writer and respected scholar, and as a key figure in the establishment of Tibetan block printing workshops. When Karma ’phrin las pa died in 1539, he would be greatly mourned by followers of both the Karma bKa’ brgyud and Sa skya traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Although his contributions to Tibet’s intellectual and cultural history were quite remarkable, he has been neglected and has not received the attention which he deserved in academic studies until now.

This study aims to present, on the basis of a number of mostly unstudied Tibetan sources, a historical investigation of Karma ’phrin las pa’s life and works in the context of his time with a focus on religious history. It concentrates mainly on the following issues: the identity of Karma ’phrin las pa, the key events and periods of his life, his contributions and impact, the works he composed, and their transmission. Given the current state of historical knowledge about Tibet (and Central Asia), especially in the 14th to 16th centuries, such a historical and philological approach is clearly justified when attempting to venture into a hitherto unknown field through using original-language sources. Although the history of “great individuals” has become outdated in some respects, to examine a specific body of sources while focusing on a certain important historical person is still a valid way to generate new knowledge, clarify long-standing errors, and make sources available for future research. This holds especially true for the study of Tibetan history, where basic research is still lacking, and texts are often linguistically complex. Moreover, specific sources for other desirable approaches, for example social history, such as administrative documents or diaries, no longer exist (or are not accessible) for the 15th and 16th centuries.

Beside the key aims mentioned above, the present study will address the following questions: What role did Karma ’phrin las pa play for the two key religious traditions in which he was active? How was he involved with the shifting political powers of his time? Was he an early representative of the unbiased approach to Buddhism? In this way, I shall attempt a first cautious analysis of his life and works in a broader historical context.

The main sources for the present study are Tibetan hagiographies (*rnam thar*, also translated here as “spiritual biographies”) about Karma ’phrin las pa and all his available writings (including their colophons), along with genealogies, songs, instructions, and spiritual biographies of some of his contemporaries, as well as religious chronicles (*chos ’byung*) and a number of miscellaneous works. A deeper analysis of Karma ’phrin las pa’s views and interpretations of Buddhist doctrines would have extended the scope of this book too far. I very much hope that future studies will shed still more light on his vast contribution to Tibetan Buddhist thought.

In sum, in this book I shall try to unlock the realm of the study of the First Karma ’phrin las pa, to present a first critical evaluation, and to pave the way for future research. My initial exploration of the existing texts revealed that sources directly related to Karma ’phrin las pa’s (religious) life, i.e. spiritual biographies or *rnam thar* in Tibetan, were neither numerous, nor were they very detailed. Current knowledge of his writings was also incomplete, and a comprehensive edition of his works was not available. Accordingly, one of my main challenges lay in establishing the available sources, which entailed an intensive search for further usable texts. To uncover important cross-references and clarify doubts, I had to expand the scope to a much broader range of sources than originally intended, even though I

could not follow up some of the avenues of research sufficiently because of the limits of this project.

In the process of research for this book, a significantly more extensive spiritual biography of Karma 'phrin las pa authored by Nam mkha' lha dbang appeared (dPal btsegs publishing house, 2015). This work was thoroughly investigated while doing research at The University of Sydney from 2017, which has led to major changes in content and structure along with considerable re-writing. An earlier, different, and shorter piece on this topic was submitted in German as a requirement for the degree of Magister Artium at the University of Hamburg in 2004. The ensuing project took years to complete due to a number of factors: its being recreated in English, other research projects, the demands of a number of employments in various countries and continents, the need to keep up with new scholarly publications on related topics, and—most importantly—the aforementioned newly acquired Tibetan source. It is also thanks to the encouragement of the series editors David Jackson and Franz-Karl Ehrhard that this work finally sees the light of day. In retrospect, I would naturally approach some of the issues differently, but I still hope that this book will help provide a sound basis for approaching the life and works of Karma 'phrin las pa.

A project of this scope would have been impossible without various kinds of support, whether the expert advice of colleagues, the personal encouragement from friends, or support through funding. Hence, I would like to take this opportunity to wholeheartedly thank those who shared their time and resources. I am deeply grateful to David Jackson, professor emeritus of Tibetology (Hamburg), my first mentor and supervisor, who encouraged me to work on this topic and provided countless helpful suggestions and corrections. I would also like to extend very special thanks to Franz-Karl Ehrhard for constantly encouraging me to publish this work, his generosity in sharing time and knowledge when I visited Munich, and for his thorough feedback.

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Chapter One examines the limited previous academic research about Karma 'phrin las pa, analyses the available textual sources, and briefly discusses the methodologies applied. Chapter Two clarifies the existing misunderstandings regarding individuals named "Karma 'phrin las pa" and shows that the term is most likely a title, which has further implications for the system of reincarnation. Chapter Three analyses the religious life of Karma 'phrin las pa and occasionally discusses political contexts. It depicts the most significant events in the life of Karma 'phrin las pa, emphasising his studies with crucial masters of the Sa skya and bKa' brgyud traditions and his contributions to those transmissions through teaching, writing, and founding monastic colleges. Chapter Three's examination is to some extent based on the critical edition and translation of two main brief spiritual biographies (*rnam thar* in a *chos byung*) found in Chapters Five and Six. Next to a number of other sources, the most extensive source by Nam mkha' lha dbang is also incorporated in Chapter Three. Chapter Four provides an overview of texts belonging to Karma 'phrin las pa's collected writings and also investigates the origin and transmission of early block prints, manuscripts, and their reception. Additionally, it briefly assesses his scholarly contributions and illustrates his non-sectarian approach to contested topics of Tibetan Buddhism. Chapters Five and Six contain texts and translations of the passages from Si tu and 'Be lo's "Spiritual Biographies of the *Kam-tshang* Lineage" (*Kam tshang brgyud pa rnam thar*) and dPa bo gTug lag 'phreng ba's religious chronicle "Feast for the Wise" (*mKhas pa'i dga' ston*). Chapter Seven provides a descriptive catalogue of the accessible writings, as well as those of uncertain authorship. The catalogue includes a brief description of the content of all songs and answers to questions. It allows for an impression of Karma 'phrin las pa's writings and serves as a valuable aid for researchers. Chapter Eight offers a concluding summary and interpretation of the findings, discusses Karma 'phrin las pa in the context of his time, and suggests avenues for future research.

Conventions used in this book:

- Transliteration of Tibetan follows Turrel W. Wylie (1959) and Sanskrit transliteration for Sanskrit characters in Tibetan script, for which diacritics are used.
- Several popular Tibetan proper nouns, place names, and titles were not transliterated as they already occur in common dictionaries: Dalai Lama=Ta la' i bla ma, Gampopa=sGam po pa, Karmapa=Karma pa, lama=Bla ma, Lhasa=lHa sa, Marpa=Mar pa, Milarepa=Mi la ras pa, Shigatse=gZhis ka rtse, Tulku=*sprul sku*.
- Foreign language terms found in the *Oxford Dictionary of English* are not italicised but written with diacritics. Sanskrit: bodhisattva, sūtra, tantra, siddha, dharma, saṃsāra, nirvāṇa, saṅgha, stūpa; Greek: topos.
- The birth and death dates of Tibetan people are given when first mentioned and sometimes repeated when helpful for a certain section. (Not all were confirmed.)
- References to two of the main sources regarding Karma 'phrin las pa's life are cited from the Tibetan standard editions (*History of the Karma bKa'-brgyud-pa Sect* 1972, *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* 1986); texts and translations can be found in Chapters Five and Six. As for references to Karma 'phrin las pa's "Songs" (*mGur*) and "Questions and Answers" (*Dri lan*), the catalogue number of this book's Chapter Seven is provided in addition to page numbers of the Tibetan edition.