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Exploring Saraha's Dohākośa

Klaus-Dieter Mathes and Péter-Dániel Szántó: *Saraha's Spontaneous Songs: With the Commentaries by Advayavajra and Mokṣākaragupta*. (Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism.) New York: Wisdom Publications, 2024

Saraha—one of the eighty-four tantric Buddhist masters known as *mahāsid-dhas*—advocated immediate access to liberation through spontaneous songs (*dohā*). His legacy has deeply influenced diverse meditation traditions within Tibetan Buddhism, with modern *mahāmūdra* masters continuing to draw upon his teachings. The most significant collection of Saraha's spontaneous songs is the *Dohākośa*.

In their seminal work, *Saraha's Spontaneous Songs: With the Commentaries by Advayavajra and Mokṣākaragupta*, Klaus-Dieter Mathes and Péter-Dániel Szántó emphasise the significance of delving into Saraha's spontaneous songs, prompting an earnest examination, as both scholars and practitioners are deeply fascinated by these poetic compositions. The collaborative effort of the authors is dedicated to the edition and translation of Advayavajra's commentary. Szántó meticulously handles the critical edition of Indic materials, while Mathes assumes responsibility for the standard Tibetan root text and Mokṣākaragupta's commentary. Together, they intertwine translations to offer profound insights into these texts. Accordingly, their work comprises three main parts, namely the commentaries of Advayavajra and Mokṣākaragupta as well as the root text.

However, amidst the rich tapestry of publications and discussions surrounding Saraha's songs, the authors draw attention to core issues within the corpus that remain unresolved. The primary question revolves around whether Saraha truly existed. While there is a strong indication that Saraha was a real individual, what we know about him has been significantly embellished by tradition, portraying him as a figure of legendary proportions. Another unsettled aspect of his life pertains to when he lived. It is doubtful that Saraha lived in some

ancient past, such as the seventh century, as some theories suggest, given that the earliest concrete evidence for his work is the so-called Bagchi's Manuscript from 1101 CE.

The authors provide a detailed overview of contemporary Saraha studies, tracing their origins back to Haraprasād Śāstrī's 1916 edition and translation, which itself relies on a single manuscript of Advayavajra's commentary that has since become lost. The first comprehensive scholarly analysis emerged in 1928 with Muhammad Shahidullah's work in French, which was later translated into English by Pranabesh Sinha Ray in 2007. In 1938, Prabodh Bagchi unveiled a new manuscript of Advayavajra's commentary, now re-edited by Mathes and Szántó in their work. Rāhula Sāṅkrtyāyana's 1957 study in Hindi, based on a manuscript discovered near Sa skya Monastery in Tibet, marked another significant contribution. David Snellgrove's pioneering English translation in 1954 was followed by translations by Roger Jackson in 2004 and Kurtis Schaeffer in 2005. Despite these endeavours, the complete text of Saraha has remained elusive until recently, when two previously overlooked manuscripts filled this gap, marking a significant breakthrough in the field of Saraha studies by Mathes and Szántó.

Familiarity of the two manuscripts, before being presented for the first time in this book, had been limited to only the cataloguers who had handled the texts. These manuscripts, namely the Tokyo manuscript and the Göttingen manuscript, are identified by their respective origins—the former is housed at the Tokyo University Library, and of the latter the authors obtained photographs from the Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek in Göttingen. The two documents serve as sources for the root texts edited and translated in the authors' book.

Despite its shorter length compared to other known recensions, the Tokyo manuscript holds considerable historical significance. This is particularly evident in the identification of verse 45, where a toponym differs from that found in more widespread transmissions. The manuscript refers to the Somanātha temple located in present-day Gujarat, rather than Jamuṅā river. Consequently, the authors do not dismiss the possibility that parts of the verses may have originated in Western India.

The Göttingen manuscript is distinctive due to its completeness, consisting of ten palm-leaf folios. However, the final folio stands out as it is written by a distinctly different hand. Mathes and Szántó note that '[t]he primary scribal hand is Old Newar, probably from the eleventh century, whereas the additional folio is in an eastern hand, or a Nepalese imitation thereof, and is clearly much later, probably from the twelfth or thirteenth century' (19). The authors express

uncertainty regarding whether the last folio was intended to complete an incomplete copy or if it was obtained from another manuscript.

Mathes and Szántó regard Advayavajra's commentary on Saraha's *dohās* as the most important document in Saraha studies, yet it presents several challenges. One issue is the notable differences between the Tibetan translation and the texts found in the two manuscripts. Additionally, doubts arise regarding the authorship of the commentary. Both the language and style used, as well as the doctrinal positions, suggest that this Advayavajra may not be the same individual who was active in the first half of the eleventh century.

A significant philological analysis of Advayavajra's commentary was done by Mathes and Szántó. While the text is in Sanskrit, the authors note that 'it is nowhere near classical usage, nor is it grammatical Sanskrit with the license we would grant to Buddhist authors without hesitation. Instead, it is a thoroughly unique, extremely loose register of the language. Of course, it could be the case that the two manuscripts of the commentary are extremely corrupt' (23). They try to discern whether the unconventional language usage is intentional, as it is not uncommon in tantric texts. Such deviations may serve to protect the secrecy of teachings. The authors also discovered that despite Advayavajra writing in Sanskrit, his use of grammatical constructions suggests he was thinking in a vernacular. This revelation led them to speculate that Advayavajra might have been Newar.

While Advayavajra's commentary consists of 110 verses, Mokṣākaragupta's commentary contains 133. This suggests that the collection of Saraha's spontaneous songs expanded to 133 verses as it was transmitted to Tibetan. Unlike for Advayavajra's commentary, the authors have not found a corresponding Sanskrit original for Mokṣākaragupta's commentary. Nevertheless, they note that the authorship of Mokṣākaragupta is not a matter of dispute in the case of this commentary, as he is identified as the possible author.

The book of Klaus-Dieter Mathes and Péter-Dániel Szántó meticulously examines the collection of Saraha's spontaneous songs, presenting critical editions and translations of the root text and the commentaries by Advayavajra and Mokṣākaragupta. Through detailed philological analysis and historical contextualisation, the book offers valuable insights into the rich tapestry of Saraha's teachings, making it an indispensable resource for Saraha studies. The sole contradiction lies in the title—*Saraha's Spontaneous Songs*—which implies that liberation can be achieved *spontaneously*. However, the authors clarify that '[i]n the eyes of both Advayavajra and Mokṣākaragupta, Saraha propagates an immediate access to the coemergent as the only possible means of liberation' (35). Thus, he uses the term *sahaja* in Sanskrit. The explanation continues: 'The term *sahaja* is often translated as "inborn", "innate" or "inherent"' (*ibid.*). While the

authors ‘have decided to render it literally as “coemergent”’ (*ibid.*) in English to convey this concept, the title still retains the word *spontaneous*, which, from my perspective, is not aligned with the meaning of *sahaja*.

In summary, the book of Mathes and Szántó not only serves as an essential reference for Saraha’s spontaneous songs but also offers an extensive and insightful presentation of philological analysis and critical editions of Indian and Tibetan works. The translations provided, along with the informative notes accompanying them, make this book an invaluable resource for any scholar conducting research in Buddhist studies.