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*The Adamantine Songs (Vajragīti) by Saraha: Study, Translation, and Tibetan Critical Edition.* Lara Braitstein. Treasury of the Buddhist sciences. New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, 2014. Pp. xvi, 236. Reviewed by Julia Stenzel, *McGill University*

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Adamantine songs (*vajragīti*) are poems that express the spiritual experiences and realizations of the great adepts (*mahāsiddhas*) of South Asian Buddhist tantric traditions. While the songs' outer form emerged from folk literary and musical traditions, their content is firmly rooted in Buddhist philosophies of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Despite the importance of yogic songs in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, there has been relatively little Western scholarship on the literary genre or on individual poet-yogis. Lara Braitstein's study, translation, and Tibetan critical edition of Saraha's adamantine songs are therefore a welcome addition to the research field.

The great adept Saraha, also known as the great Brahmin, is considered one of the Indian founding fathers of the Great Seal (*mahāmudrā*) meditation tradition. His legacy has been preserved in Tibetan Buddhism, where he is venerated by all schools of the Later Propagation. Tibetans preserved his writings in their canons. The Tibetan Derge canon contains twenty-four works attributed to him; three of these form the trilogy of adamantine songs.

Part 1 of *The Adamantine Songs* begins by introducing Saraha as a charismatic, yet elusive figure, comparing his traces in Indian, Tibetan, and Western scholarship. Despite a lack of verifiable historical data, Saraha occupies an important place in Tibetan literature and ritual practice up until the twenty-first century, as Braitstein demonstrates with a recent liturgy composition that focuses on Saraha as its central figure. Yet, the sincere veneration for Saraha did not prevent Tibetan scholars from transmitting several humorous anecdotes about Saraha being scolded by his female companions and teachers.

The introduction then broadens to contextualize Saraha's role, and that of Indian siddhas in general, within Indian Vajrayāna Buddhism. Braitstein draws interesting parallels to poet saints of the Śaiva, Sufi, and Tamil Bhakta traditions, thus giving her readers glimpses into the poetic-spiritual life of medieval India between the fifth and twelfth century. Even though siddhas are now claimed as founding fathers by institutionalized traditions, it seems more likely that they were looking for truth beyond the boundaries of religious institutions. The opening lines of the *Adamantine Songs* show Saraha as a free-thinking spirit who seeks to find truth beyond sectarian identification. In one swoop, Saraha criticises spiritual seekers, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike.

Hey! Wearing matted-locks, grasping at self and agent,  
 Brahmins, Jains, hedonists, materialists accepting a real basis for things,  
 Claim omniscience but don't even know themselves.  
 They are deluded and far from the path of liberation,  
 Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas, Yogācārins and Mādhyamikas, etc.  
 Criticise each other and argue,  
 Ignorant of the space-like equality of appearances and emptiness itself, they turn  
 their backs on the innate. (p. 125)

The remainder and major part of Part 1 is a detailed introduction to siddha literature, which includes, besides adamantine songs, also couplets (*dohā*) and performance songs (*caryāgīti*). The songs presented in this book form a trilogy, named respectively Body Treasury, Speech Treasury, and Mind Treasury. They take a threefold perspective on the highest spiritual achievement of the yogic path, the so-called Great Seal (*mahāmudrā*, *phyag rgya chen po*), alternatively named the Innate (*sahaja*, *lhan cig skyes pa*).

Because of their esoteric content and their symbolic language, adamantine songs are difficult to understand and necessitate the explanations of commentators. It is a peculiar fact that there is not a single commentary for Saraha's adamantine songs whereas his other great opus, the *dohā* trilogy, received tremendous attention from commentators. Braitstein draws extensively on these commentaries to elucidate key themes of the adamantine songs. Her analysis of Saraha's symbolic terminology deserves special attention. In her translation, she coins the terms "recognition" and "decognition" for the Tibetan *dran pa* and *dran med*. In a careful analysis of possible meanings found in the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, the *Khanda Sutta*, various dictionaries, and commentaries by contemporary Tibetan teachers, Braitstein argues convincingly that the more commonly known translation of *dran pa* as mindfulness or recollection do not make sense in the adamantine songs. In other contexts, mindfulness refers to a positive, deliberate mental effort that is said to be conducive to attaining awakening. Saraha, however, describes *dran pa* as "incorrect conventional perception" (p. 99). "Recognition that relies on signs is the cause of wandering," he states in the Speech Treasury (verse 44, p. 160), equating the mind's capacity to apprehend appearances ("signs") with the root cause for conditioned, cyclic existence, with all the pain of bondage and suffering that this entails. Its opposite, *dran med*, is "the nature of non-conceptuality" (verse 62, p. 137), a "realm of experience where meditative equipoise is great bliss" (p. 101). It is obvious that Saraha is not talking here about a simple loss of mindfulness, or a swoon, but about a mindlessness that is free of subject-object duality. The eminent translator of Saraha's *dohā* trilogy Herbert Guenther had rendered these same terms as "memory,

and nonmemory.”<sup>1</sup> Braitstein’s coinage of a new terminology, recognition, and decognition, opens new paths of reflection on previous translations and scholarship regarding these concepts, and shows how the great adepts redeployed terms known in early Buddhism with new meaning according to their own yogic methods. A similar case of hermeneutics can be seen with another great adept, Maitrīpa, who in the eleventh century reinterpreted the negatively connotated non-attention as a positive meditation practice of mental non-engagement (*amanasikāra, yid la me byed pa*). It would have been a worthwhile deepening of Braitstein’s discussion on symbolic terms to draw out parallels between Saraha’s and Maitrīpa’s hermeneutics.

Part 2 of the *Adamantine Songs* presents the English translation of the trilogy, and Part 3 a critical Tibetan edition. Braitstein bases her work on four canonical sources and one non-canonical text collection, with the Derge Tengyur (*sde dge bstan ‘gyur*) as a working basis. Her work is the fourth monograph on Saraha’s literary legacy, next to Guenther’s *Royal Song of Saraha* (1973), *Ecstatic Spontaneity* (1993), and Kurtis Schaeffer’s *Dreaming the Great Brahmin* (2005). Braitstein’s contribution is thus of indispensable value for all those wishing to immerse themselves in the study of Indian and Tibetan siddha literature, and particularly that of the great adept Saraha.

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1. Herbert V. Guenther, *The Royal Song of Saraha, A Study in the History of Buddhist Thought* (Berkeley, California: Shambhala Publications, 1973), 6.