

Tricycle Talks

“Saraha, Poet of Blissful Awareness”

Episode #115 with Roger Jackson

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Roger Jackson: The image of sky, of course, is a very important and common one throughout Buddhist traditions, and for a good reason. If, after all, the nature of things is emptiness, then if we're thinking metaphorically, and we can't help but think metaphorically, we think in metaphors, then sky is at least an approximation of that in that it gives you a sense of the limitlessness of that, the openness of that—all the possibilities that can occur within that, all of which, it turns out, are of a single taste. And you know, the taste of the real is what Saraha is trying to get us to experience for ourselves and to recognize that if we do taste the real, it's not just a big blank. *Everything* tastes of the real, and ultimate reality pervades our conventional reality. If we only could wake up to that fact, then we'd be free.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Roger Jackson. Roger is a scholar and translator, as well as professor emeritus of Asian studies and religion at Carleton College. In his new book, *Saraha: Poet of Blissful Awareness*, he provides a comprehensive introduction to Saraha, an Indian Buddhist tantric adept who is known for his controversial and at times confounding mystic songs. In my conversation with Roger, we talk about the many legends surrounding Saraha. Saraha's fierce critique of nearly every possible religious and social standpoint, and how to situate Saraha's radical claims in the context of the Buddhist movements of his time. Plus, Roger reads a few of Saraha's *dohas*, or spiritual songs. So here's my conversation with Roger Jackson.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with scholar Roger Jackson. Hi, Roger. It's great to be with you.

Roger Jackson: Hi James, good to be back.



James Shaheen: So, Roger, we're here to talk about your new book, *Saraha: Poet of Blissful Awareness*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Roger Jackson: Well, I've sort of been a fan of Saraha for, I don't know, fifty, sixty years, maybe. I first read Herbert Gunther's translation of his so-called King Dohas when I was an undergraduate at Wesleyan many years ago and found it absolutely intriguing. As a child of a counterculture, I found Saraha to be a sort of perfect Indian exemplar of the kinds of things I was feeling in the culture around me. But as, you know, as life has it one, one goes in somewhat different directions, and I ended up in Buddhist studies, ultimately, it was in the Gelug tradition, which doesn't look quite so much at figures like Saraha and the other great siddhas of India. Nevertheless, Saraha was always kind of in the background there for me. It was like I would study Gelugpa philosophy by day and read Saraha by night, and so I always maintained a kind of fascination, and eventually that led to a profound interest in Mahamudra, or Great Seal traditions, and Saraha is in fact the sort of fountainhead for almost all Tibetan traditions, really for all Tibetan traditions, of their Mahamudra traditions.

And so I began, as I worked on various aspects of my Mahamudra project, Saraha began to appear again and again and again. And so I began to write more about him. I did some translations almost twenty years ago from the Apabhramsha originals of Saraha, Tilopa, and Kanha, and then somewhat more recently was asked by Kurtis Schaeffer to contribute a volume to Shambhala's Lives of the Masters series that was kind of an overview of Saraha, what we know of his life, his writings, and of course to provide some translations of his work. So Saraha has figured large in my life.

James Shaheen: Just so the listeners know when they hear the word again, you mentioned the *King Doha*. What is a doha?

Roger Jackson: A doha is technically a form of poetic verse in Indic languages, Sanskrit, Apabhramsha, various Prakrits. It gets carried over into Tibetan, where it's often simply



translated as *gur*, which means song, but more often than not, it refers to a kind of spiritual song. And so actually the tradition of spiritual verse, of which Saraha is an important part in India, gets eventually transmogrified in its own ways in Tibet into the songs of figures like Marpa and Milarepa and other great Tibetan poets. But essentially a doha, it's a rhymed couplet in the original version of it, but you lose the rhyme when it goes over to Tibetan. It changes as you would expect it would change from one linguistic culture to a different one.

James Shaheen: Well, they're wonderful to read, and there's plenty of it in the book. You describe Saraha as a Tibetan saint who was accidentally born in India. What do you mean by that? You use a cricket analogy.

Roger Jackson: Yeah, I'm playing off a wonderful line from the postcolonial scholar Ashis Nandy, who wrote a book called *The Tao of Cricket*, which I think he begins by saying that cricket is an Indian game that was accidentally discovered in England, and my point in sort of pilfering that line from Ashish Nandy is that there probably was a historical Saraha who lived in India, maybe we could say in about the 10th century of the Common Era. We know very little about him from any Indic sources that we have, whether that be original texts, let alone something biographical. Really, Saraha is, if he's not an invention of the Tibetan tradition, he's somebody who comes into full flower as an important figure in the Tibetan tradition, and particularly at the time of what's called the second dissemination of the teaching, which begins around the year 1000 in Tibet.

Mahamudra, the Great Seal, was a very important concept in Indian and especially Tantric Buddhism at that time, and as Tibetan schools picked up on the importance of Mahamudra and the Great Seal and developed meditative traditions of their own, Saraha was seen because of the various works attributed to him that prominently feature Mahamudra to be a key figure, and so the Tibetans built up then, maybe based on some Indic sources, maybe based on some oral traditions, we honestly don't know, but began to build up a kind of biographical corpus around this name, which was really all they had, Saraha, which means “the fletcher” or “the



arrow-maker” or “the one who shoots an arrow,” and then so they developed this whole biographical corpus to go along with this growing corpus of texts that were attributed to Saraha, which when the Tibetans were done translating, supposedly from these Indian languages, amounted to somewhere between thirty-five and forty texts, maybe. So he's a major figure in the canon that was translated into Tibetan.

James Shaheen: You quote Kurtis Schaeffer, the editor of the Lives of the Masters series, who writes that it was in Tibet that Saraha was dreamt into existence, which is more or less what you were just saying. Could you say more about this? He was dreamt into existence?

Roger Jackson: Again, what I think Kurtis meant by that and what I mean by that is that Saraha, as a redoubtable and important and influential figure, was sort of fleshed out in Tibet. What the Tibetans inherited, again, was maybe a scrap of legend or a scrap of some story here or there, some texts that are fairly clearly authentic in some regard, other texts that are perhaps of questionable provenance. We don't know whether the translator was actually the one who wrote the text and attributed it to Saraha. But it was the Tibetans who, for their own purposes, made Saraha a central figure.

One of the important things, I think, to keep in mind about Tibetan traditions, though this is not unique to Tibetan Buddhist traditions, this is true of all Buddhist traditions, lineage is tremendously important, and so if Mahamudra is going to be an important part of various Tibetan traditions, and it is, all the Tibetan traditions have a place for Mahamudra, some obviously more prominently than others, and if you've got an important practice, an important practice has to be legitimated by being able to trace it back to some significant human founder who in turn has to be in direct contact in one way or another with Buddha in some form. We're not talking about the historical Buddha Shakyamuni here when we're talking about somebody like Saraha, but we're talking about Saraha's contact with, for instance, a dakini who gives him various symbolic teachings that help him to gain realization. So Buddha in some form has to always be at the source of a lineage. There has to be a human fountainhead, and then there has to be a succession



of teachers that follow on that. So the Tibetans, one might say concocted, I don't mean that in a particularly negative sense, but maybe they dreamed particular lineages that traced themselves back to Saraha and led down to their own teachers and traditions and thereby legitimated them.

James Shaheen: This is true in all lineages, whether it's the Zen Patriarchs or *buddhavacana*, this occurs everywhere. It's really wonderful to see, though, how it plays out in Tibetan Buddhism and that comes up in your book. As you've mentioned Saraha has been incorporated into a number of lineages, and there are many stories of his appearances in the dreams and visions of later teachers like the 11th-century teacher Marpa. You write that while Marpa was being detained by tax collectors in Nepal, he dreamt of being blessed by Saraha. Can you tell us about this dream and some of the other visionary encounters?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, I'm not recalling all the details of that particular dream, but there's a kind of a pattern that you see developing in Tibetan accounts of their dream meetings with Saraha, during which, incidentally, Saraha will usually give them a teaching in doha form, in the form of these spiritual songs, but often the dream will involve a journey, for instance, to South India, Sri Parvata, and there the master who's dreaming this will have an encounter with Saraha, either in embodied form or as a disembodied voice, who will then convey various teachings. These lead to certain realizations. And when Marpa or, later on, for instance, the third Karmapa, kind of wakes from his dream, he has these communications from Saraha to convey.

Although of course Tibetans will often talk about their own masters as being, quote, incarnations of famous figure X or Y, there isn't really a Saraha incarnation lineage in the sense that there's a Dalai Lama incarnation lineage or a Karmapa incarnation lineage, but this is one of the ways in which Tibetans have access to these figures, right? I mean, the whole visionary experience is vital in all sorts of Tibetan traditions. This is true, obviously, in the Nyingma tradition and the Kagyu traditions on the one side, but the Gelug tradition is filled with these encounters as well. Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug, had his great realizations and in fact received a Mahamudra tradition from Manjushri, the wisdom bodhisattva, and by the same token, later



masters within the Gelug would have visions of Tsongkhapa, who would communicate special teachings. So the whole idea of a visionary encounter with a figure who on one level has been dead for many centuries is a key part of this, and again, it can come in direct visions, it can come in dreams, it comes in these various nonordinary states of mind to which particularly yogis are prone.

James Shaheen: You know, Saraha is a pretty colorful character. His biography includes narratives of him cavorting with a fletcheress, undergoing various trials after drinking liquor, and sitting in concentration for twelve years without getting up. So could you walk us through some of the highlights in the literature about Saraha?

Roger Jackson: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if it's too long to read. There are two or three major narrative threads in the Saraha biographical literature. Again, with one possible exception, this is essentially the product of Tibetan culture and not Indic culture. Maybe I will just read, it's not tremendously long, the so-called radish girl narrative, which is probably the oldest one that we have. It's from a text, a very famous text actually, attributed to an Indian named Abhayadatta Sri, called *The Lives of the 84 Mahasiddhas*, and it's been translated, it was first translated into German in 1916, and then James Robinson translated it, and then Keith Dowman translated it. Anyway, it's been a widely used text both not just by Western scholars and practitioners but within Tibetan traditions as well.

James Shaheen: Roger, could you tell us just really quickly for our listeners what a mahasiddha is?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, sorry, a mahasiddha, the term literally means something like great or greatly accomplished one, and this is a term for what we might consider to be the exemplary tantric practitioner, particularly in the Indian or Indic traditions, but of course, notions of it carry over into Tibetan traditions as well. The idea is that it's someone who has accomplished or attained *druptop chenpo*, the sort of full fruition of the tantric path, and these were figures who



were widely celebrated. They were both admired and feared within the Indian context, and they're actually part of a larger Indic pattern of kind of wrathful holy men, because they often are countercultural and problematic in the ways they act and live. They sort of try to upset the Brahmanical apple cart, as it were, even though many of them were Brahmans to begin with. Saraha is actually an example of that. So, again, they're kind of exemplary spiritual figures for tantric traditions. They're considered to be bodhisattvas, incidentally. They're within the larger compass of the Mahayana, but I've forgotten who it was long ago who sort of talked about three exemplary Buddhist spiritual ideals, the arhat being the kind of classic example for what we would now call the Theravada tradition, those early Buddhist traditions, the bodhisattva being the ideal in the sort of standard Mahayana, and the mahasiddha being the ideal within tantric traditions.

So anyway:

Saraha was of the brahmin caste and was from Roli, which was part of the city-state of Rajñi in eastern India. He was the son of a dakini. Although he was a brahmin, he had faith in the Buddhadharma, and through hearing the Dharma from countless masters, he developed confidence in the Secret Mantra Dharma. He upheld both Brahmanical and Buddhist vows, practicing the Brahmanical religion by day and practicing the Buddhist religion at night.

When he resorted to liquor, every brahmin heard of this and they all assembled in order to have him exiled. They said to King Ratnapāla, “You are the king. Is it proper to engage in a perverted religion in this land? Saraha, the Archer, may be the chieftain of fifteen thousand households in Roli, but by drinking liquor he has undermined his caste status, and must be exiled.” The king said, “I don’t want to exile someone who controls fifteen thousand households.” That’s a marvelous little piece of realpolitik there.

The king then approached Saraha and said, “You are a brahmin, and it’s not proper for you to drink liquor.” Saraha said, “I didn’t drink liquor and will swear an oath to that effect, so assemble



every brahmin and all the people.” They all assembled, and Saraha declared, “If I have drunk liquor, let my hand burn; if I have not drunk it, may it not burn.” He plunged his hand into boiling butter, and it was not burned. The king said, “So in truth, did he drink liquor or not?” The brahmins said, “In truth, he drank.”

Repeating his statement, Saraha drank molten copper and was not burned, but the brahmins said, “Nevertheless, he drank.” “Well,” said Saraha, “if someone goes into the water and sinks, then they drank, but if they don’t sink, then they didn’t drink.” The other brahmins went into the water singly or in pairs. When he went in, Saraha did not sink, while the others did. “Saraha did not drink,” everyone declared. Saraha further said—it goes on, there’s various other trials, all of which Saraha passes with flying colors. When Saraha passes these trails, the king declared, “If someone who has such abilities drinks, let them drink!”

All the brahmins, and the king as well, bowed down to Saraha and requested instruction. He sang songs to the king, queens, and all the people; these are known as the Doha Trilogy. The brahmins abandoned their own religion and entered the Buddhist teaching.

After that, Saraha took on a 15-year-old servant girl, instructed her, and led her to another land. They lived in a remote place. He engaged in practice, while the girl served him and cared for him. One day, he said, “I want to eat radishes,” so the girl added radishes to buffalo yogurt and took it to him. He was sitting in concentration, though, and wouldn’t get up.

Saraha did not rise from that concentration for twelve years. When he finally got up, he asked, “Where are the radishes?” The servant girl replied, “You’ve been in concentration for twelve years without getting up, so now where are they? Springtime has passed, and there are none.” Saraha said to the girl, “Now I will go to the mountains to practice.” The girl said, “Isolating the body is not isolation; isolating the mind from signs and concepts is supreme isolation. You sat in concentration for twelve years, but you couldn’t sever a tiny sign, the thought of radishes. What’s the good of going to the mountains?” When she said this, Saraha thought, “That’s true,” and he



abandoned signs and concepts, took to heart the primordial meaning, obtained the special attainment of supreme mahamudra, and worked limitlessly for the aims of beings. He and the girl eventually went to the land of the dakinis.

James Shaheen: That's wonderful. Roger, I have to say, Saraha was a Brahmin by day and studied Buddhism by night. It makes me think of you being a Gelug by day and reading Saraha by night.

Roger Jackson: Probably not quite, but yeah, I take the point.

James Shaheen: Well, you didn't make it quite yet to the land of the dakinis. While there are a number of stories like these, there's not a lot of precise biographical information available, of course, and you suggest that if we can't locate Saraha biographically, that we can instead regard him as a corpus, and a vast corpus at that, since his work spans many genres and styles. So how do you think about Saraha as a corpus?

Roger Jackson: You know, the attempt here, I suppose, is one of these foolish quests to try to find some historical figure who is maddeningly elusive to us, and so if through examination of biographical accounts, we really can't locate very much about Saraha other than where we began with this name of somebody who is associated with arrows in some way, so you say, well, OK, if there's no real there there, or not much of a there there, maybe we can find some coherence to Saraha by examining the works that are attributed to him. And again, here, I have to reiterate that we have several versions of an Apabhramsha language text of the *Doha Kosha*, or *Treasury of Dohas*. There's a famous version of it that's been edited and translated a number of different times. For Western scholarly purposes, it was kind of discovered in Kathmandu around 1916.

James Shaheen: And, again, this is an Indic language.

Roger Jackson: Apabhramsha is a language that is to be found somewhere between classical Sanskrit and the modern vernaculars like Hindi or Bengali. And so it's a sort of a Middle Indic



language, but it was known to Tibetan scholars as well, and works from Apabhramsha were translated into Tibet quite certainly. But, we have, you know, several different versions of this one particular text in Apabhramsha. We also have some songs attributed to Saraha in a very famous collection of the sort of *charyagiti*, the performance songs or conduct songs of various Buddhist mahasiddhas. There are four or five songs attributed to Saraha in that collection, but that's really all we have in some kind of original language where Saraha is identified as the author. Beyond that, it's all Tibetan. And so if, as I suggested earlier, there's somewhere between thirty-five and forty texts that we can attribute to Saraha, almost all of them are only available to us in Tibetan. Now, of course, most of these, though not all of them, are part of the translated Tibetan treatises, the Tengyur. I think most of your listeners will know that the Tibetan canon is broadly speaking divided into the word of the Buddha, the Kangyur, which is sutras and tantras and so forth, and then the teachings, the translated teachings, which doesn't mean teachings of the Buddha directly but the teachings of the great figures from the tradition, from Nagarjuna and Asanga and Vasubandhu down through various mahasiddhas.

So where Saraha's texts are going to be located is in the Tengyur. By being included in the Tengyur, they are regarded as being authoritatively and authentically Indic originally, even if we don't have a scrap of the original text available to us. And so you think, “Ah, this is great, now we've got a lot of text. We're going to be able to form this composite picture of Saraha on the basis of his, in effect, being a corpus of texts.” But of course, when you begin to examine the provenance of these texts, the linguistic terms of these texts, the terminology of these texts, and begin to understand that even within Tibetan tradition, there was controversy about even some of his most famous writings, you begin to realize that the corpus doesn't really hold. If we take a corpus as a body of work, the corpus begins to fall apart in the same way that Saraha as a biographical subject begins to fall apart, and we don't have a great deal of certainty about what, quote, Saraha actually composed and what was, again, the product of some later translator or transmitter of tradition. And so the search for Saraha amidst this vast, really good-sized corpus of



texts doesn't really bring us any closer to identifying, “Ah, this is Saraha,” than the biographical works do.

James Shaheen: In his *Doha Treasury*, which you just mentioned, he writes, “Just as motionless water turns to waves when moved by surging winds, so the king sees Saraha appearing in various guises, although he is one.” So, let's talk about these guises. Could you lay out some of the main guises you've identified him with?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, this is a famous line from the *King Doha*, which is one of this trilogy of dohas. This would have been the songs that he sang for the king after he passed all the tests the brahmins could throw at him. In any case, what I try to do, having more or less seen Saraha disappear as a biographical subject, I thought of him at one point as being like a kind of a character in a postmodern novel, where you start out with this character and eventually they just kind of disappear.

I was actually thinking of Slothrop in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, a reference some folks will get, and it doesn't matter if you can't. Anyway, having seen him most uncertain through the search for some core Saraha through his writings, I kind of throw up my hands in a way and say, well, let's just talk about Saraha and the different guises that we see him take in his various writings. We've got the writings at least. They're attributed to Saraha. We're going to stop beating our heads against the historical wall and just say, OK, we've got these writings, what do we see? We see, among other things, Saraha appearing just as a poet who, on the one hand, recognizes that actually the experience of ultimate reality, the experience of awakening, can't possibly be communicated. You know, this is not new with Saraha, and it's not new with Buddhist masters. It's a common complaint slash claim of mystics the world around that the taste of the ultimate cannot really be conveyed. As he says at one point, it's like trying to explain sex to a virgin. You're just not going to get it. But at the same time, like mystics the world around and like Buddhist mystics more specifically, it's sort of like, you can't say anything, but you got to say something because it's so important. And so Saraha becomes a singer of songs, and he identifies



himself as the poet at various points, and I spent some time in the book, and won't do this now, just kind of looking at the way the poetry comes across where we have it in the Indic original, and then how that looks in the Tibetan, but that's more for folks who are interested in the study of poetry and prosody and so forth. But really, the important guises that I see Saraha taking on are, basically there's four of them: Saraha the Critic, Saraha the Radical Gnostic, Saraha the Tantric Yogin, and Saraha the Mainstream Buddhist. And I think one of the problems in the study of Saraha and the mahasiddhas more broadly is that people tend to focus on the Critic and the Radical Gnostic aspects, and they sometimes forget that all this exists, this social and religious critique which Saraha is famous for within all of Indian tradition and what I call a Radical Gnostic approach. Now, by gnostic, I don't mean the sort of specific heresy, if you will, within Christianity, which says that there is spirit and there's matter and there is this dramatic division between them. I mean gnostic in the sense of looking directly to *gnosis*, to divine wisdom, transcendental knowledge, and saying that this is what we have to directly understand.

And Saraha, you know, it's in effect the flip side of his social and religious critique. He makes fun of brahmins, he makes fun of Jains, he makes fun of other Buddhists, he even makes fun of Tantric Buddhism, but on the other hand, if he's radically negative in those sorts of ways, he's also radically affirmative of the absolute purity of the mind and the need to just cut through everything and realize that directly. So that's sort of Saraha the Critic corresponding to, on a more positive note, Saraha the Radical Gnostic. But people often forget that Saraha existed within some kind of a historical and cultural and religious context and that he almost certainly was a practitioner of what we would call the yogini tantras, or the mother tantras as Tibetans sometimes call them, these very late-appearing tantric systems within the Indian scene, among them of which the most famous are something like the Chakrasamvara tantra, the Hevajra tantra, the various Vajrayogini-related tantras.

Saraha clearly was a practitioner of and very familiar with the language of these tantras, but even more broadly than that, we have to recall that Saraha is a Buddhist. Others may try to claim him



in certain respects, but he is above all a Buddhist, and for all his social and religious critique, for all his radical gnosticism, for all his exploration of sexual yogas and various sort of transgressive elements of the Tantric tradition, the frame within which Saraha is working is still quite classically Buddhist. He's got a very famous line from his *Doha Kosha* found in the Apabhramsha and of course in the Tibetan version, it's this line to the effect, where after he's been through this critique of various religious systems, he basically says, and I'm paraphrasing here because I don't have it right in front of me, but someone who dwells only in emptiness but forsakes compassion is, you know, sort of completely out of it. Somebody who dwells only in compassion but doesn't understand emptiness doesn't get it. It's only when you join these two that you're actually going to gain some kind of spiritual liberation. This is simply classic Mahayana path theory. And then he operates as well with the three bodies or four bodies of the Buddha. There's things he doesn't talk about much that you find in more classic traditions. But he is still a Buddhist and in some ways even a kind of classical, even sometimes a kind of conservative Buddhist. He may on the one hand talk about different elements of tantric sexual practices, but on the other hand, he'll make fun of people who think you're going to attain enlightenment just by having sex. So he plays very skillfully among all of these. He takes one guise and then another, and because of the way these texts are often organized, you have to be alert to see that he's switching levels or switching guises on you.

James Shaheen: So in other words, when he's a critic, for instance, he's a critic in a Buddhist context, so he's always existing within a Buddhist framework. Is that correct?

Roger Jackson: I would say so, except that, again, because his critique does extend to other Buddhists, you know, he talks about people who get obsessed with the fourth initiation and what that gets you, and he makes fun of Mahayanists who sort of run around in circles, you know, trying to interpret sutras.



James Shaheen: Right, but before you can really go there, you have to have a true grounding and know what it is that you're critiquing. So I was wondering if you could give us a taste of his fierce critique. Would you be willing to read a passage from his *People Doha*?

Roger Jackson: I would. I'd be happy to. This is sort of the first, I don't know, ten to fifteen verses. And you'll find these in pretty much every version of this text, whether we're talking in an Indic language, in Tibetan, regardless of different versions than within Indic languages and Tibetan, so if we want to find something that's fairly close to a Saraha core, this may be at least part of it. So he begins, he says,

Improper gurus, who are like venomous snakes,
are stained by their flaws and will certainly sully good people:
just to see them should make you afraid.

Brahmins don't know thatness:
pointlessly they recite the four Vedas.
They purify earth, water, and *kusa* grass,
and sit at home burning sacrificial fires;
their burnt offerings are meaningless,
and the smoke just damages their eyes.

With staff or trident in the guise of a god,
they expound on difference or “I am that”;
they're equally ignorant of good and bad,
and divert beings into falsehood.

Smearing their bodies with ash,
they pile their hair atop their heads;

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staying at home, lighting their fires,
they sit in a corner ringing their bells.

Seated in lotus posture with eyes closed,
they whisper in people's ears and deceive them;
teaching others such as widows and nuns,
they bestow consecration and collect their guru fees.

Long nailed, their bodies smeared with filth,
unclothed, they pluck out their hairs:
the Digambaras are deceived in thinking the self
will gain liberation on a path consisting of pain.

If nakedness leads to freedom,
then why aren't dogs and foxes free?
If plucking out hairs leads to freedom,
then women with plucked-out hair must be free.

If raising one's tail leads to freedom,
then the peacock and yak must be free;
if eating food off the ground leads to freedom,
then why aren't horses and elephants free?

The Archer says, It's never the case
that Digambaras are liberated;
bereft of blissful thatness,
they have only their bodily hardships.

Those so-called novices, monks, and elders—now we're getting to Buddhists—
and, likewise, renunciant clerics—

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some are involved in explaining sutras,
while others are seen grasping for mind's single taste.

Some run along with the Great Vehicle,
the authoritative treatises of the textual tradition,
or meditate on nothing but mandalas and chakras;
and some wallow in explaining the meaning of the fourth consecration.

Still others conceive thatness as the element of space
or see everything in terms of emptiness—
for the most part, they all live in disagreement.

Others, bereft of the connate,
apply themselves to meditation on nirvana—
not even a few of them will accomplish
the ultimate; on the contrary, they will not.

Can someone who aspires to the ultimate
win liberation by sitting in contemplation?
What use are lamps and food offerings to the gods?
What do they do? What use is imparting secret mantras?
Pilgrimage spots and austerities are useless.
Can you win liberation by immersion in water?

And it goes on to quote this famous passage about compassion and emptiness being both necessities along the path. So that gives you a feel for it. This is arguably the most extended critical passage in any of the works of the mahasiddhas, who are themselves famously countercultural figures, and this is a side note, but you hear very interesting echoes of this in later Indian traditions, sort of post-Buddhist, for instance, in the great figure of Kabir, who was



working largely within a context of Hindus and Muslims and had the same kind of scathing criticism as Saraha had and also sang dohas in a sort of proto version of Hindi. So this is certainly one element of Saraha and one of the things that has made Saraha so famous.

James Shaheen: A very rebellious part of me loved reading that. It's lots of fun. You know, you mentioned Saraha the Radical Gnostic, where Saraha puts forth the notion of the pathless path and insists on the possibility of direct, unmediated entry into knowledge of the ultimate. Could you tell us a bit about Saraha the Radical Gnostic? What is it that he's putting forth?

Roger Jackson: Yeah. Well, I began to sort of gesture at this earlier, and I would say that this is the rhetorical style that Saraha uses, and he uses it a great deal. So again, like Saraha the social and religious critic, Saraha the Radical Gnostic is undeniably a major and central guise among those that he puts forward for us. And the idea is really that the mind itself as it is, without any kind of interference, without any kind of conceptualization, without any kind of meddling, is primordially pure. I mean, this is a notion that, of course, listeners who are familiar, well, on the one level with something like Zen, on the other level, if they're particularly familiar with Dzogchen or Mahamudra teachings from Tibet, this is a very familiar claim. And, of course, it goes back in the Indic tradition actually to a passage in the Pali Canon, which says that the nature of mind is luminosity, and its defilements are only temporary or accidental or adventitious, and it's of course a fundamental claim in the buddhanature literature as well. Saraha himself doesn't talk about buddhanature explicitly ever, and yet the rhetoric of buddhanature is working its way profoundly through the Radical Gnostic side of Saraha. And so, you know, the implication of this is that you've got to drop concepts. Stop thinking. And of course this is a dramatic claim. Granted, all Buddhists probably from the beginning have recognized that there are limits to rationality, limits to reason, limits to language, but the sort of virulent insistence that you've got to just, in effect, sit down, shut up, and drop all of that, and just see your mind the way it already is is a fundamental claim of Saraha the Radical Gnostic. Sometimes he's so uncompromising that, as you suggested, it's almost like a pathless path, to borrow that term, I think, from



Krishnamurti, and Saraha will not seem to give you any guidance whatsoever, you know, just sort of see mind as it is. Other times, he will gesture somewhat at modes of meditation through which you might come to this. And it does have, it turns out, something to do with control of the breath, with recognizing and cutting through the layers of consciousness to the mind as it truly is in its original state. You know, people talk about mind seeing mind as a key element of this kind of meditation.

But again, Saraha the Radical Gnostic is fairly uncompromising. And as you talked about your own response to it, you know, mine, when I first read this kind of rhetoric, was very similar. It's like, yeah, cut through all the crap, just see it. But, of course, easier said than done I think would be the watchword there, and that's then when you begin to recognize that you can't just isolate, as much as we kind of delight in Saraha the Radical Gnostic and the kind of rhetoric he uses just as we delight in Saraha the Critic, if you will, the countercultural side of us perhaps kicks in to a considerable extent, as it did when I first read Saurabh. But again, to recognize then that this is within a larger cultural context of tantric practice and Buddhist practice, that's where things get tricky, a little more technical, and maybe it doesn't turn out to be quite as easy as you think.

James Shaheen: There's just this quote that we understand the ultimate is ineffable, from Saraha, and yet something must be said, and he writes in his *Doha Treasury Song*, “Every being is trapped in syllables, and not a one is without syllables, but when you're without syllables, it's then that you know syllables.” I love that, and I wondered if you could just say something about that.

Roger Jackson: Yeah, I think in many ways the quotation speaks for itself, but we could read it perhaps as Saraha's own self justification for singing songs about that which we cannot actually sing songs about. I mean, Saraha, it should be said, is not a modest man. Like many great Buddhist figures, there is a certain degree of self-confidence there, and I think he feels that he has understood things the way they are and that if you understand things the way they are, within the context of recognizing that no linguistic or intellectual construct can possibly capture reality,



nevertheless, that is the person who is qualified to say something because something must be said, because it is so important, after all, that we realize our own true nature.

James Shaheen: You know, I just want to read something from *Mahamudra Pith Instruction* that gets at this: “Just as the sky is sky without reference points, so the empty is empty without meditation; nondual knowing is like water and milk: diverse things have the uninterrupted single taste of great bliss.” So there you are. But I have to admit, I'm not quite there.

Roger Jackson: Yeah, and there I am not either, but it's delicious to think about.

James Shaheen: Yeah, absolutely.

Roger Jackson: And maybe even to try to replicate contemplatively. I don't know. I mean, the image of sky, of course, is a very important and common one throughout Buddhist traditions, and for good reason. If, after all, the nature of things is emptiness, or lack of self, use whatever term you might want, then if we're thinking metaphorically, and we can't help but think metaphorically, we think in metaphors, then sky is at least an approximation of that. It gives you a sense of the limitlessness of that, the openness of that, all the possibilities that can occur within that, all of which it turns out, to take the last line there, are of a single taste, *eka rasa*. The term *rasa* in the original Indic language is, of course, an extremely rich language. It's tied in with Indian notions of aesthetics, the different savors or tastes that different kinds of aesthetic presentations have. But of course, it also simply talks about the taste that something has, and the taste of the real is what Saraha is trying to get us to experience for ourselves and to recognize that if we do taste the real, it's not just a big blank. Everything tastes of the real. And that, of course, is a central point. I would say in Zen, I would say in Dzogchen, in Mahamudra traditions in Tibet as well, that ultimate reality sort of pervades our conventional reality, and if we only could wake up to that fact, then we'd be free.



James Shaheen: I can say one thing about reading texts like this. It can be really helpful even if one is not realized when it comes to the seriousness and striving that we might ordinarily experience in practice to loosen that up a little bit. You at least know that that's there. So I found that very useful. You know, what about Saraha the Tantric Yogin? How are his writings situated within esoteric Tantra?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, well, again, I would kind of circle back to a point I made more generally a few minutes ago to the effect that we really can't read very much of Saraha's work, and certainly not the works that are authentically Indic, without reference to these tantric systems in sort of late first millennium, early second millennium India. The Tibetans themselves kind of organized Indian tantra under various schemes. The Nyingmas have one way of talking about it; the new translation schools like the Kagyu and the Kadam and the Sakya had other ways of talking about it. But all of them recognized that there was, if you will, a kind of historical development in terms of the appearance of these tantras. Now, the Tibetans would say all these were taught by the Buddha originally, but their appearance in India can be kind of traced historically, and what Saraha is part of is part of a sort of circle of tantric Buddhist practitioners of the very latest tantras to appear in India before Buddhism began to go into serious decline in India, roughly around the year 1200. It's not like it disappeared overnight, but it really did go into a swift decline starting around then. So, you know, Saraha himself is maybe a century or two before this, and many of the figures who went to Nepal and Tibet and translated Saraha's works are from this era as well, and they were steeped in these yogini or mother tantras, again, which are notable by their frequent references to great bliss, their sometimes detailed accounts of tantric sexual practices, their celebration of the four joys that might be experienced within the central channel of the subtle body in the most advanced tantric practices, all of this is the milieu in which Saraha and most of the other mahasiddhas seem to be operating.

And so what this tells us is that we immediately gravitate to a figure, a guise like Saraha the Radical Gnostic, not to mention Saraha the Critic. If we want to understand how Saraha really



means most of what he's talking about, we have to re-inject ourselves into that milieu. Now, we can't do that historically speaking. The closest we can come to it, I suppose, is to practice Tibetan instantiations of these and receive initiations, undertake various practices, but to understand and respect the fact that it's, you know, we might say, don't try this at home necessarily. This is not easy stuff. You used the word esoteric, and this is highly esoteric systems of theory and practice that were dominant on the Indian scene, again, in the late first millennium of the common era and the early part of the second millennium. So if we hear Saraha saying, you know, drop everything, cut to the chase, you can't just do that without reference to the kinds of practices, some of which he even makes fun of. You know, he makes fun of mantras and mandalas and obsession with the fourth initiation. But actually, if you haven't been through that stuff, you're not going to be in a position, probably, to have direct access to the actual nature of mind that's been there from the beginning.

James Shaheen: You know, maybe to give us a taste of this side of Saraha, could you read *Ornament of Springtime*?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, I'd love to. This is one of my favorites. So this is a quite short and I think quite mysterious poem that's attributed to Saraha. I can't say anything more than that it's attributed to him. I'll just read it and then maybe say a couple of things about it.

I prostrate to the glorious Heruka. (That immediately identifies it as connected with the yogini or mother tantras.)

I, a youth who sees the flowers
of spring, the pomegranate, the three bodies,
and other delights, am intoxicated.

Desiring Heruka, I say,
here at the very beginning of spring,

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please be my protector,
and don't let me die of passion.

May I enjoy sweet-smelling
ambakaruna flowers.

The *saripa*, it is said, beats his drum,
and candali carries the lamp,
and the master painter descends.

I hope the young man will come;
now, at the beginning of spring,
may you be my protector,
and don't let me die of passion.

Looking in the ten directions,
I don't see anything but you,
and in the fire of my passion,
I don't even think of my own body.

Through our prayers
to the four transmission-yoginis,
may the Blessed One be roused.

James Shaheen: That's wonderful.

Roger Jackson: Yeah, and when we remember that this was written, this is attributed to a male, and yet to me anyway, and I haven't seen other scholars really address this too much, but it seems to me that he's doing something that occasionally we find in Indian devotional poetic literature, which is a male adopting the voice of a female. It seems to me that this is the voice of a young woman who is desiring Heruka. Heruka is clearly a male figure, and the sense of longing is also



something that is very reminiscent of later, and some earlier, *bhakti* or devotional poetry within both Hindu and Muslim traditions in India. And it also has, of course, these references to desire and longing and the association, in an oblique kind of way, between notions of sexual satisfaction and some kind of awakening or enlightenment. So just a kind of marvelous and very personalized and really quite different text by Saraha.

James Shaheen: You know, one key theme here is the role of the body, and Saraha writes, “The bodiless is hidden within the body: knowing this, you'll be free.” So could you say more about Saraha the Tantric Yogin's perspective on the role of the body in awakening?

Roger Jackson: I would say that on the broadest level, one of the key features of tantra is the notion that it is actually through the body that one achieves spiritual liberation and that in fact if you don't have a body, you're not going to get liberated, that you have to be able to transform the various elements of the body and the body's emotions in order to become fully realized. That's a sort of broadly tantric theme, whether we're talking Hindu Tantra or Buddhist Tantra. Saraha has all these different comments about the necessity to experience and transform the senses, like don't abandon the senses the way earlier Buddhist literature sometimes tells you to abandon the senses. Embrace the senses, but transform them. I mean, there's a whole kind of alchemical imagery that's very important to tantra and very important to Saraha as well. But the other reference here, when you talk about a body within the body, is almost certainly a reference to the subtle body. That is, again, a theme in tantric traditions in India but also to non-tantric yogic traditions as well. The idea of, well, they'll say there are 72,000 different channels that we have as our subtle body, which is actually the basis for what happens in our coarse physical body and our mind to some degree. So, for Saraha and for yogins or yoginis who are involved in these esoteric tantric practices at the highest level, it's actually work within the subtle body that is most crucial because that's where the ultimate transformation of both the physical and mental basis of what we are has to take place, and it's not easy to get access to that, and that's why we have all



these complicated tantric practices and also why we have to purify and also practice the more standard Mahayana path before we can be ready for these advanced and esoteric practices.

James Shaheen: Right, so despite his departure from mainstream Buddhism, you nonetheless say that there is Saraha the Mainstream Buddhist. Can you say something about that?

Roger Jackson: Yeah, again, this is just a way of gesturing at the fact for that despite all his critique of every possible religious and social standpoint you could locate in his era, despite his often radical claims that we just have to drop conceptuality, get rid of language, and see mind as it is, despite his involvement in these very esoteric practices and circles of practitioners, which he almost certainly was part of in whatever his actual historical context may have been, he still hews in a very basic way to fundamental Buddhist values. He clearly upholds notions of Buddhist ethics and of kindness, of being selfless.

One of the last lines of his famous *People Doha* is “Not working to benefit others, not bestowing gifts on the needy: this, alas, is the fruit of samsara—better you should toss out selfhood.” I mean, this is Buddhist Ethics 101. And by the same token, the kind of language that he uses in talking about ultimate reality, the language of emptiness and thatness and suchness and so forth, is right out of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and in some cases, earlier Buddhist materials.

And, you know, along these various lines, you find that Saraha is really, whether or not we could call him actually a conservative Buddhist, I'm not so sure, but the fundamental values that we're more used to from early Buddhism, from sort of standard Mahayana Buddhism are there. And this is actually a theme among all the mahasiddhas, the great tantric adepts of India, that although they may seem to behave outrageously, may seem to say outrageous things, nevertheless, at the core, it still is about human kindness and about the realization of the actual empty nature of things and well, what can we do with that? How can we live that out? You know, maybe we, in our particular cultural context can't and probably shouldn't try to live it out in quite the way that the mahasiddhas did or even some of the legendary figures of Tibetan traditions, but as you said,



and I really like this comment, well, it doesn't exactly give us license, but it helps to loosen the weave a little bit in our practice to remember that not all this is hard and fast. It's not like, as Saraha says in the *King Dohas*, water when whipped by wind in the winter turns to ice. If we can retain the kind of fluidity and openness that Saraha is talking about, then at least we're getting something of his spirit, even if not every element of what Saraha says and does is a blueprint for how we ought to be living.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it helps me not to take myself just too seriously when I am. But one of the great delights of reading Saraha in all his guises is sometimes how surprising and strange his writings can be, and a prime example of this is his *Key Instructions*, which, to an outsider at least, don't necessarily feel like instructions at all. So could you read the first set of Saraha's *Key Instructions*? I mean, this I had to admit, it came at the end, and it was my send-off.

Roger Jackson: Yeah, it's a strange send-off to be sure, and I think I probably put it last for exactly that reason. So this is a set of key instructions that are divided according to fairly standard scholastic categories like view, meditation, conduct, fruition, the path, experience, and then the key point. So there's sort of seven sets of anywhere from thirteen to eighteen or nineteen. They're really not verses so much as lines. They are poetic lines in that they scan in the Tibetan, but this is supposed to be on the view. The text identifies this as being on the view. And I'll just read them in sequence and kind of leave you with it in a way.

1. The sesame illuminates the lamp.
2. Be like medicine effected by mantras.
3. The peacock's food is not for others.
4. Sandal is the scent of the deer's musk gland.
5. Waves of water are the sea itself.



6. The nature of clarity is like white cotton.
7. Though a mountain cannot be shaken, it is no different from glacier water.
8. Garlic and its odor are not different.
9. The quality of the sun and moon is clarity.
10. Don't look for the tracks of a bird.
11. The sky is not a topic for logical analysis.
12. The dimensions of a maṇḍala are symmetrical.
13. A zombie is like a jewel in the world of activity.
14. The wondrous crystal jewel is incomparable.

James Shaheen: That was a surprise.

Roger Jackson: Now, this is a text that nobody, so far as I know, has really commented on, and I should say that it is of especially questionable provenance. It may well have been composed by the great Indian master Padampa Sanggye, who visited Tibet on four different occasions in the 12th century, roughly. Be that as it may, it's a wonderful collection, and it's supposed to be key instructions on Mahamudra. And yet certainly the term Mahamudra never appears there. Now, if you're trying to grasp onto these, you can find a few things, like clarity of the mind, or, “Don't try to track a bird in the sky,” oh, that sounds kind of Zen. You know, you grasp onto things, and yet it doesn't really give you very much of a foothold. And in that sense, maybe Saraha gives us a proper send off into our kind of bemused quasienlightened bafflement, which may or may not be some kind of approximation of enlightenment.

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James Shaheen: So, Roger, you've been a real trooper getting through this, as under the weather as you are. But is there anything else before we close?

Roger Jackson: No, it's been great fun, and your questions are delightful and very apposite, and I hope that people will find the book interesting. And my advice to folks who pick this up is you don't necessarily sit down and read it cover to cover, and if you're working through some of the earlier somewhat more scholarly sections, particularly the section where I kind of outline all the different works we have that are attributed to Saraha and you begin to glaze over, just go to the poetry. That'll usually be a good bracing bit of cool water.

James Shaheen: Actually, all of it I really enjoyed. Like I said, I picked it up and I couldn't put it down, and I hadn't really expected that. But it's written with such clarity and color that it was just a delightful read. So, Roger Jackson, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Saraha*, available now. Thanks again, Roger.

Roger Jackson: Thank you so much.

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