

REFLECTIONS ON MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH IN HIMALAYAN STUDIES: THE CASE OF THE BOOK

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A very well known topic of discourse and debate in Tibetan Buddhist philosophy is the ontological enquiry into the objectivity of a bowl of water (*chu phor gang*).¹ The question is not just about whether the bowl is half full or half empty, although that too is a matter of individual perspective, but about the very perception of water. In Mahāyāna philosophy, water is said to be only a human perception. The same liquid we think of as water is perceived as nectar by celestial beings, home by fishes, pus by hungry ghosts and so forth. To dogmatically argue that the liquid is essentially water and to claim that seeing it as water has a higher ontological veracity than anything else, is to argue that one perspective, i.e. the perception of water, is true. This assumes superiority of the human species over others and is necessarily prejudiced.

In order to fully understand the ultimate nature of the entity which humans perceive as water, one must transcend the human perception and the limitations set by the physical and cultural conditioning of a human being. Only from a higher vantage point, from where one can have a more open, comprehensive, holistic and integrative viewpoint, can one get a full picture of the object or scheme of things and come to appreciate the significance as a whole. The understanding of the ultimate nature of things such as a bowl of water requires such unbiased and unconstrained viewpoint. In the case of the water, the ultimate nature perceived through such an open and unrestricted enquiry is the emptiness or lack of a fixed, intrinsic substance which paradoxically manifest in multiple empirical forms to different viewers.

Such arguments of perspectivism and the need for multilateral thinking may sound worthwhile pursuits only in the realm of philosophy and may be shunned as too conceptual in dealing with issues relevant to the real world. But for all we know, even what that real world is varies from people to people, from culture to culture and from time to time. The world, as it is, is not singularly one way or the other but is a sum of multiplicity. Cultural and historical topics we deal with are not mono-characteristic but composites of a wide variety of properties and values, or otherwise known as causes and conditions in the Buddhist idiom. Thus, they cannot be properly understood from a single perspective. A multilateral perspectivism is crucial in our approach to religious, historical and cultural studies. It is in the approach involving acknowledgement, integration, synthesis of multiple perspectives, or in other words, a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach that we may find the best research and pedagogic tool to tackle the topics belonging to the Buddhist Himalayas.

This paper is a part of the presentation entitled *Multidisciplinary Approach in Himalayan Studies: A Case of the Book*, which I made at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology Jubilee Conference in October 2008. The presentation dwelt mainly on the study of the Tibetan Buddhist book using a multidisciplinary approach. It was a survey of the diverse roles and functions of the book, its religious and social significances and the practices and rituals in which it is used. The story of the book has since taken a greater shape and is now being planned as a separate monograph on the book in Himalayan Buddhist culture. I shall not be discussing the roles and significances of the book in any detail here. The first half of this

article is an elongated version of the preliminary remarks I have made in that presentation in favour of a multidisciplinary approach in Himalayan studies. I argue that a multidisciplinary approach is crucial for the academic research and study of the Himalayan history and culture for academic, social and political reasons. In the latter part of the article, I have included a summary of my study of the Tibetan Buddhist book as a prelude to a separate illustrated book on the book.

WHY MULTIDISCIPLINARISM?

It is perhaps not an overstatement to say that the subject of Buddhist Himalayan studies is considered to be a highly exotic and colourful one. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition throughout its intercourse with the outside world has been viewed as a very rich, and even a highly perplexing and confusing system of ideas and practices. This impression is largely due to the very complex nature of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama, often claim that Tibetan Buddhism encapsulates the entire range of Buddhist philosophical and religious traditions from the basic *pratimokṣa* precepts to the most secret Vajrayāna mysticism. It is seen as an amalgam of seemingly divergent traditions skilfully accommodated in one system. Tibet inherited, to put it in a Tibetan idiom, ‘the entire teachings of the Buddha’ (*rgyal bstan yongs rdzogs*) which originated in India.

Buddhism reached Tibet only after about a century of its formation and growth in India. When it did, it came in gradually continuing for almost a millennium until Buddhism ceased to exist in India. This has no doubt contributed enormously for both the volume and variety of Buddhist teachings and practices in Tibet. However, the complexity of Tibetan Buddhism did not come about only due to the diversity of Buddhist systems it received. Central Tibet, where Tibetan Buddhism first took its shape, was the melting pot of civilizations and cultures coming from India, China and Central Asia at that time. Neither did Buddhist teachings arrive in Tibet without the cultural trappings of its Indian, Central Asian or Chinese origins, nor did it remain untouched by the cultural practices existing in Tibet. Its incorporation of and assimilation into the local Tibetan practices including the Bon tradition was considerable, so much so that today a Bon monastery can be even mistaken for a Buddhist one in its external structures and routines as well as doctrinal exegeses. Furthermore, the Buddhist system in Tibet has evolved throughout the one and half millennia of its existence. The history of Tibetan Buddhism with its successive accretions and developments accounts for much of the complexity and colour of Tibetan Buddhist systems.

Our area of study is an exceptionally complex field, and such complexity, according to William Newell, a leading theorist of Interdisciplinary Studies,² necessitates a multidisciplinary approach. It is through dealing with our subjects from various angles and methods and by adopting the eye of different disciplines that we can challenge the complexity of the subject that confronts us. The complex structures and behaviours of our subject give us the rationale for an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach.³

The parts of the complex structure that is the Buddhist Himalayan culture are not disjointed isolates, which can be taken apart and studied independently in total seclusion from other parts. As underscored by the Buddha’s doctrine of causation or theory of interdependence (*rtan ’brel*), the many parts, values, properties and behaviours which make up the complex structures are intricately intertwined in interdependence and any understanding of them can only come from understanding this connection. Across all disciplines, our subjects are clusters of multiple strands. They present themselves as a nexus

of multiple qualities, values and behaviours which are interconnected. The most viable method to unpack the interconnected features of our subjects of study lies in a varied but interconnected approach. The interdependence of the social, historical, religious, political, epistemological aspects of the topic calls for the interdependence of approaches from these different disciplines.

When confronted by a complex subject, complex not only in having many parts and aspects but also in having several levels of ontological, epistemological, social and political existences, the student/inquirer risks adopting a specialized narrow approach and subsequently being inclined to present the findings about the part as though it were about the whole. A typical example is our reading of hagiographical literature such as a *rnam thar*. While an academic historian is generally preoccupied with finding out the socio-political facts about the subject, a traditional reader is mainly interested in the inner spiritual and magical achievements of the subject. Where an academic discusses spiritual and religious aspects of the subject, it is often with an attempt to explain them purely in secular and worldly terms, sometimes even by going to the extent of speculating a hidden political agenda. The traditional reader on the other hand mythologizes the life of the subject with an oversight of even glaring facts about worldly desires and concerns. They each come up, perhaps unwittingly, with narrow conclusions giving a one-sided picture of the subject, whose life can only be properly appreciated by looking at an amalgam of lives and personalities. A good example of such partisan work and subsequent controversy is the study of the life of the Bhutanese religious figure Padma Gling pa (1450-1521) by Michael Aris, who adopts a very critical rationalist approach on the one hand and Pema Tshewang and Sarah Harding, who takes a very devotional attitude on the other.⁴

Another good example is art history. No Tibetan Buddhist art can be fully understood and explained without looking into its philosophical and religious underpinning, the socio-political and economic circumstances for its production and the physical process of its development. Yet, true to the Buddhist teachings on non-self and modesty, the artefact normally does not even bear a signature of the artist and an art historian is often left with only the physical description. Meanwhile, a lot of information on the art and its production may be found in the middle of a text, which may not be of any obvious use to the textual scholar. It is often the case that biographies and catalogues contain a detailed inventory about the production of art including the artists and patrons. Similarly, the iconographic description of a deity and its symbolism are often embedded in liturgical chants and exegetical literature. A multidisciplinary approach not only remedies the affects of excessive specialization and helps us obtain a bigger and more accurate picture but helps us bring together various expertise. It can lead us to a mutually beneficial scheme of sharing of knowledge and information. In this process, a multidisciplinary approach can infuse us with a regard for knowledge. It inculcates a culture of appreciation for all kinds of knowledge in which no information is useless. It also helps us develop a scheme to share information.

Excessive specialization can be also damaging politically for scholars whose financial needs are dependent on funding bodies and philanthropic individuals. Funding for highly focused studies with no outcome of interest to the general public is becoming rare as less and less people believe in learning for learning's sake and in the advancement of knowledge without practical purpose or readership. As modern economy compels higher education institutions to produce outputs that are relevant to the wider communities, subjects which are of no or little significance to the contemporary world are swiftly getting antiquated. The case of diminishing Latin and Sanskrit studies and the growth of economics and development

studies is sufficient evidence for this trend. Unless reasonably general and comprehensible, remote fields like ours can be easily confined to the ivory towers being viewed as having no direct relevance and relation to the real world, especially in the West. Thus, it is important that the progress of our studies is not constrained by the limitation set by specialised knowledge.

The electronic and digital technology has transformed the way we organize and seek knowledge today. With a whole library now available in a pocket size hard drive and information available on the internet at the click of the mouse, the digital technology has made multidisciplinary approach all the more easy. It has led to dynamic changes in knowledge construction, blurring disciplinary boundaries and replaced linear models with advantages such as hypertext links that disregard disciplinary boundaries. The digital technology has also made communication between scholars very easy. Thus, a multidisciplinary approach is not only crucial for the success of our study but opportune for our time.

If the successful study of any topic requires sound contextual knowledge and an understanding of its place in the greater scheme of things, a multidisciplinary approach remains indispensable for such a successful study. The multiple approaches elucidate the topic that is under scrutiny, just as a thorough going knowledge of the topic presupposes the understanding of its various realities, aspects and functions. Thus, to know one thing well is to know all things around it. The mastery of one topic presupposes and unpacks the knowledge of all (*gcig shes kun grol*). The Tibetan pedagogic analogy of the mountain-view presents a striking case for multidisciplinary. To know any part of the mountain adequately, one must get a commanding view of the whole mountain. It is only through having a holistic view from the summit of the mountain that one can appreciate the full scale and significance of its parts. Karma pa Dus gsum mKhyen pa (1110-1193) takes the analogy even further to argue that for a good view of the other mountain, one must see from this mountain (*pha ri lta 'dod na tshur ri nas ltos*).⁵ In other words, one must step outside the perspectival and disciplinary boundaries of one's work in order to get an unbiased and comprehensive picture of the subject. To use the analogy of the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, one has to be a 'fox' who knows many things in order to be a 'hedgehog' who knows one big thing for full knowledge of any topic must come from the comparison and contrast of many things around it.⁶ Although one could agree with Isaiah Berlin in the general classification of literary figures into the fox-like and hedgehog-like and also apply such generalization in Tibetan and Himalayan scholarship, it may be argued that a fox-like approach involving an extensive study and knowledge of many things is essential to a hedgehog-like mastery of any particular topic. The knowledge of one big thing requires looking at it from all possible disciplinary and methodological angles.

Indeed a great deal has been written on interdisciplinary studies in general so much so that it has ironically even become a separate discipline. A lot can be also said about the applicability of multidisciplinary approach in Himalayan studies. In my current work, I take the case of the book for such a multidisciplinary study. The book makes a perfect topic for a multidisciplinary approach as its study involves history, philosophy, religion, art, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, politics, technology and economy. A partial approach to the book cannot effectuate a complete picture of the book. Hence, a hedgehog-like approach to one aspect of the book would be inept in capturing a comprehensive understanding of the book although one has to be aware that a fox-like approach can become scattered and disconnected if knowledge of the various aspects are not coherently consolidated. Here, I

shall merely present a summary of my account of the Tibetan Buddhist book which I hope will soon be available separately as an illustrated work.

THE CASE OF THE BOOK

In the following passages, I present a synoptic survey of the Tibetan Buddhist book culture. We have seen recently a sudden rise of interest in the book and manuscript culture. Two major works on the culture of Buddhist manuscripts and books have appeared this year alone. While *Buddhist Manuscript Cultures* published by Routledge is a collection of essays on the history and culture of manuscripts in many Buddhist communities, Schaeffer's *The Culture of the Book in Tibet* discusses book production and usage in Tibet through the lives of a few literary figures. The forthcoming book, *Ancient Treasure, New Discoveries*, put together by Hildegard Diemberger and myself and published by Brill also contains several articles on the recovery and use of rare manuscripts and books.

My interest in the physical book stems from my work on the Tibetan manuscripts in the British libraries and the ongoing programme of digitizing manuscripts in Bhutan supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library. It was while working on these projects that my academic interest and occupation, which until then concentrated on religious philosophy and practice, gradually veered to the study of the physical book itself. It was also in the course of these projects that I encountered a large number of beautiful manuscripts, which deserve to be treated as much as exceptional works of art as special texts. I was intrigued by how the book, with its roles and functions, permeated the Tibetan Buddhist culture. One could even ambitiously claim that the understanding of the Himalayan Buddhist culture needs a good understanding of the book and a good understanding of the book lies in the good understanding of the many aspects of the Tibetan Buddhist culture. By looking at the book from various disciplinary angles, I hope to gain a holistic and complete picture of the book. This paper, however, is only a synoptic preview, which hopefully will stimulate further thoughts and discussions on the diverse and dynamic role of the book in the Tibetan Buddhist communities as it did during the conference in Gangtok.

The use of the book or *dpe cha* pervades the Himalayan Buddhist world. The Tibetan Buddhist culture, to quote Prof. Germano, is a culture of the text.⁷ For a land sparsely populated and where the majority of the population was illiterate, the Tibetan Buddhist world has produced a significantly high volume of texts of both translation and original writings. Tibetan writers, however few there may have been in comparison to the illiterate masses, almost always possessed a strong zest for writing. Writing (*rtsom pa*) as one of the three activities of the learned, beside exegesis (*bshad pa*) and debate (*rtsod pa*), is a mark of a scholar. Thus, we have an astounding size of literary heritage in both manuscripts and xylographic prints. However, it is not merely as a literary production that the book is valued. The book is a Buddha in one context, a scripture in another and a ritual tool, community relic, a political icon or an economic commodity in yet another context. The book is many things to many people. This study attempts to survey these various realities, roles and ramifications of the book and answer the basic question of what the book means to different Tibetan Buddhists.

THE BOOK AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY

From a historian's perspective, the book is first and foremost a historical tool. Historical writing is one of the outstanding characteristics of the Tibetan Buddhist literary culture. Unlike the Indic world, to which the Tibetan Buddhist looks up with awe and reverence as the source of sacred knowledge, and as a literary exemplary and intellectual authority but is impoverished in the tradition of historical literature, the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is rich in its historical books. Historical writings in the form of biographical and hagiographical literature (*rnam thar*), religious histories (*chos byung*), political histories (*rgyal rabs*), annals (*deb ther*), genealogy of throne-holders (*gdan rabs*), chronicles (*byung ba*), spiritual narratives (*rtogs brjods*), study records (*gsan yig*), guide books (*gnas yig*) and catalogues (*dkar chag*) comprise the wealth of Tibetan Buddhist historical literature.

However, what is even more interesting is that beside the instrumentality of these historical writings in recording and reconstructing Tibetan Buddhist history or part thereof, the Tibetan Buddhist history can be almost entirely told through the book, through its rise and fall, its increase and decrease. From the use of the book as historical trope in the legend of the reliquary which fell from the sky during 27th Yar lung King Tho tho ri gNyan btsan to the outburst of literary activity in Tibet in recent years, the rise and fall of Tibetan Buddhist civilization is inextricably linked to the situation of the book. It forms an important yardstick to measure historical transformations and the main historical criterion for periodization of Tibetan Buddhist history when we look at eras such as *snga dar* or early propagation, *phyi dar* or later propagation, and the modern phrase *yang dar* or further propagation and what Seyfort Ruegg⁸ calls classical and commentarial periods. The designations Earlier Translation (*snga 'gyur*) and Later Translation (*phyi 'gyur*), from which arose the distinction of the Ancient School (*rnying ma*) and New School (*gsar ma*), are based on the different translations of books. The period of Yar lung dynasty spanning the reign of Srong bstan sGam po, Khri srong lDe btsan and Khri Ral pa can is remembered as golden age of Tibet and it is no coincidence that this period also saw the introduction, diffusion and consolidation of the book under the three great emperors.

The formation of most Tibetan Buddhist traditions took place around particular books, which became their focal sources of doctrinal teachings and spiritual practices. Similarly, the early religious controversies between the adherents of old and new schools in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were on the authenticity of certain books just as the sectarian conflicts in the nineteenth century leading to the *ris med* ecumenical movement were mostly about scholastic and doctrinal exchanges in the form of books. In the story of the book, we see the tension and conflicts between received tradition and innovation, between exotericism and esotericism and between tradition and modernity. We also see how treasure books such as the *Ma ni bka' 'bum* and *Padma bka' thang* changed the Tibetan religious and political imagination of themselves and their identity by introducing new narratives about their past and by propagating the culture of spiritual figures such as Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava. The growth of printing technology around the seventeenth century had significant impact on the social and religious life as did the scholastic *yig cha* literature on religious education and scholarship. In brief, the book is a fascinating lens throughout which one can see the rise and fall, the contests and conversions, the conflicts and conciliations of the Tibetan Buddhist systems.

THE BOOK AND THE BUDDHA

If the book can encapsulate Tibetan Buddhist history, it certainly is an epitome of the Tibetan Buddhist religious system. Although the Buddhist tradition in general does not have a central scripture comparable to the Bible, Koran or the Gita, the role of the book is pivotal so much so that it sometimes even surpasses the Buddha in its importance. The book represents the actual path to enlightenment; the Buddha is only a guide. So, the book is attributed a deep religious significance and spiritual sanctity. The sanctity is mainly due to the sacred content of the book. As religious topics form the subject matter of the vast majority of the books in the Tibetan Buddhist world, the book has come to be seen as almost synonymous to religious scriptures. Even books on secular sciences such as grammar, poetry, politics and profane literature are viewed as sacred, produced in the format of the holy scriptures and given the same treatment as religious books. However, it will be an oversimplification to say the book is holy merely because of its religious content. The Tibetan Buddhist book-view and the attitudes and practices associated with it have a deeply philosophical and religious underpinning.

The book is the word of the Buddha in one context, an emanation of the Buddha in another and a relic of the Buddha in yet another one. The most common understanding of the book however is certainly as the physical embodiment of dharma—the words of the Buddha. It contains the Buddha's teachings, the path to enlightenment. The book is a salvific tool with a soteriological significance. It is the ultimate object of refuge because it actually takes a person to enlightenment; the Buddha and Sangha are only guides and companions. Due to this centrality, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist scholars have extensively broached the topic of the book *qua* dharma and developed different theories and taxonomies of dharma. The book as embodied dharma remains at the heart of Buddhist soteriology and informs a wide range of religious behaviours and practices.

However, the most interesting view of the book is the book as the Buddha. This is not just a case of personification or anthropomorphization of the book. We see this book-view in a range of doctrinal and philosophical discourses. The ultimate Buddha is the *dharmakāya*—the body of dharma. He who sees the dharma sees the Buddha.⁹ Similarly, in the early canons, the *vinaya* is given the status of the teacher, the Buddha. In the Mahāyāna system, we see the elevation of several sūtras, as well as a rigorous theory of Buddhahood and its power to emanate and a certain belief that the Buddha will emanate as words in the degenerate era.¹⁰ The tantric tradition takes the Buddhicization of the book even further with its theory and practice of mantras and divine words and syllables. The word even precedes the body in being the emanation of the enlightened state of the Buddha as it is seen in most Tibetan tantric practices. In addition to the theories of the book as embodiment of doctrinal teachings and extensions of enlightened ontological/existential realities, the book is also viewed as a holy relic, the *dharmā śarira*, and as one of three receptacles or supports (*rten gsum*) of the enlightened body, speech and mind. The book, thus, has very important doctrinal and philosophical dimensions, which needs to be understood in order to fully appreciate the religious and spiritual value of the book.

LIFE AROUND THE BOOK

The religious, philosophical and spiritual dimensions of the book I have touched upon constitute the cultural ethos which underpins the diverse behaviours and customs of

individuals as well as communities in relation to the book. It is largely due to the profound religious and spiritual significance that the book has a wide range of roles and uses in the society as both educational and ritual tools. The book is, first of all, a reading object and an educational tool. The concept of education is so intricately linked with the book that to study in some Himalayan languages is to 'look at the book' (*dpe cha lta*). From the first lessons of learning alphabets to very advanced training in abstruse philosophy, the book is used as an essential instrument of education and learning. Even scholarly achievements are measured in terms of books and academic qualifications named after books. The composition of a book is seen as the ultimate mark of scholarship.

Yet for the majority of the population, the book is a holy object of worship and veneration. Following the cult of the book in ancient India, the book is attributed a transcendental power capable of sacralizing the place where it is kept, warding off evil spirits, misfortunes and natural calamities and bestowing positive blessings to the devotees. This has subsequently led to the elaborate traditions of production, storage, veneration and use in which the book is treated almost like a holy person. The books are nicely wrapped in 'clothes' offerings of food, drinks, incense and flowers are made to them. The devotees make prostrations to them and receive blessing and even the temple where the books are stored is often called the house of the book (*gtsug lag khang*).

The book is therefore not just an inanimate object but living entity with a quasi-psychical power and life of its own. It is a ritual object attributed with transcendental agency and the best examples of this role of the book as a ritual object is seen in the culture of ritual reading and the parade of books, two very common ritual practices in Himalayan Buddhist communities. These rituals have led to the formation of different social patterns, norms and structures and have left significant political and economic ramifications. Another social characteristic of the book is its power to empower people. From the devotees who receive its blessing from the book and soldiers who carry booklets as amulets through scribes, carvers, commissioners and readers of books to the discoverers of hidden books, we see the book empower the person psychologically, spiritually, socially, economically or politically. The function of the book in society spans a person's life from use of astrological text during birth to the funerary rituals when intensive use of books such as the Tibetan Book of Dead is made.

THE BOOK AS KNOWLEDGE AND ART

The book represents the organization and presentation of human knowledge and information in their finest form. However, the book is not merely valuable as a medium of knowledge and information it contains; the book is itself knowledge and information. Like art, architecture and landscape, the book tells us a great deal about the human experience and about the events and thoughts which shaped them. The book is a cultural product and as such its features including the shape or design, the base on which it is written or printed, the script, ink, pen, decorations, illuminations, physical organisation and layout provide us plenty of information about the broader socio-historical context of its production and use. The long *poti* format of the book, for instance, tells us about its origins in the Indic palm leaf manuscripts while books in scrolls (*shog dril*) indicate Chinese influence and the bound *gos tshem* suggests imitation of codices from Central Asia and Europe. The various scripts tell us about the historical and regional development just as the quality of illuminations, ink and paper tell us about the economic circumstances of its production.

A single leaf of the book can thus contain a trove of information about human ideas, experiences and endeavours involved in the production of the book and the state of craftsmanship, technology and economy at the time of its creation. The story of the book and the information it embodies becomes even more intriguing and extensive if one starts to unravel the history and properties of the individual aspects of the book such as script, ink, paper, pen, wood block and covers. Paper and ink, for example, are important subjects of study in their own right and a proper study of these two can provide good insight into the human knowledge of the environment, the state of technology, and even tax structures and trade arrangements.

In the Tibetan Buddhist book, we also find a very special scheme of organizing ideas and knowledge, which is heavily influenced by the Indian Buddhist models. The physical book shows us how ideas and knowledge are structured, presented and preserved as well as an implicit evaluation of the significance of the knowledge it contains. The colophons of the book often contain a great deal of ethnographic and bibliographical information, which in turn helps us understand the life of the scribes, carvers and patrons and the prevailing political and cultural climate. Such information proves vital for historical, codicological and philological studies.

A very important component of the book is illumination. Illuminations not only beautify the book aesthetically but also provide a lot of additional information. Often the illuminations in the Tibetan Buddhist book give a good clue to the origin and background of the book as well as the socio-political and economic circumstance of the production. They also give the first hint to the content and significance of the book and draw the attention of the reader to the salient features. The illuminations on the book remind us of the interplay between art and text and the shifting boundary between them. Where does art end and text begin? Many artworks include bits of text and numerous manuscripts are aesthetically as valuable as paintings and sculptures because of their illuminations and calligraphic beauty. The book is thus a work of art and writers, scribes and carvers are no less artists than painters, dancers and calligraphers.

THE BOOK AS PERSON AND PERSON AS BOOK

Like the relationship between art and the book, we also see a conceptual interplay between the book and person. We have seen in the earlier passages how the book is attributed manifold agency. From its role as educational tool and ritual object to its function as soteriological expedient, the book is considered as an active agent in different processes of educational, cultural and spiritual transformation and development. This agency is heightened in the theory of the book as the Buddha. The book is seen as an extension of the personhood and intentionality of the Buddha and treated like a person in many cultural practices involving the book.¹¹ Most of the vocabulary used for the book comprises honorific terms used for people and the book is viewed as a sacred 'living' entity. The personification of the book becomes even more intense and complex with the portrayal of certain texts or cycle of teachings in Mahāyāna and tantric Buddhism as deities and divine beings in ritual and iconography.

If the personification of the book and thought of the book as being person-like is fascinating, the reverse portrayal of a person as the book is even more so. Intellectuals are generally considered bookish (*dpe cha ba*) and they are shown with a book in iconographic representation but the Tibetan Buddhist allegory takes it even further. An erudite scholar is

sometimes figuratively thought of and described as the book (*glegs bam*).¹² There are also cases where great scholars even dressed themselves as a book to show off their erudition.¹³ Thus, we see the book metaphorically turn into a person and vice versa. These allegorical presentations give us interesting insights into people's ideas about the book and persons and their view of the relations between people and things.

Another such idea which the culture of the book brings out is the Tibetan notion of totality and integrity. As suggested by the concept of *gsung 'bum*, literally a hundred thousand speeches, and *bka' 'bum* or a hundred thousand words, which are all-inclusive collections of writings, the notion of totality and integrity forms the driving motive for the book culture and the numerous book projects. Various methods including enumeration of syllables, stanzas and leaves and inclusion of catalogues and lists also point to the importance of the integrity of the book. The book provides us in these different ways an excellent window to the many aspects of the Tibetan Buddhist culture and society.

FROM POTI TO PIXELS

The second half of the twentieth century saw perhaps one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of the book in the Tibetan Buddhist world. First, the rich literary heritage of Tibet faced a wide spread destruction and dispersal during the Chinese invasion and the Cultural Revolution. This was then followed, particularly in the final decades, by numerous projects of reproduction, documentation and digitisation of texts as corrective efforts to preserve and consolidate the damaged and fragmented texts. It was also during this critical period that the Tibetan book culture encountered modern technology, which in many ways facilitated the resurgence of the Tibetan literary culture both in Tibet and outside. Yet this meeting with the dominant Western tradition of the book and modern printing and digital technology was not without problems and challenges.

The exposure to the Western book culture and access to advanced technology brought dramatic changes to the ways in which Tibet Buddhists constructed, reproduced, accessed and disseminated knowledge and information. Today, most Tibetan Buddhist books are published in modern Western format of a bound book in spite of fears among some conservative quarters that the sanctity of book and other cultural practices based on the traditional book are being lost with the disuse of the *poti* design. Furthermore, the advancements and proliferation of computer and digital technology are bringing fundamental changes to the concept and use of the book. Books are now easily and rapidly being produced in very malleable, transferable and reproducible formats such as digital images, e-books, websites and databases.

The electronic technology and internet facilities are transforming the way we organize and access knowledge and the very idea of the book. Although the Tibetan Buddhist book culture has not been affected by the usual challenges including copyright violations and plagiarism, it is confronted with other cultural problems such as the difficulty to impose censorship on books with esoteric content and to retain socio-religious authority over knowledge transmission.

The rich culture of the book in Tibetan Buddhism is today at a critical juncture. Whether or not the book will survive and be of expedient use in its traditional *poti* format and what major changes will reshape the Tibetan Buddhist book are questions I will discuss in my forthcoming book. For now, one can only surmise that the Tibetan Buddhist book in this digital era, when a large library can fit in small hard drive or a book can be obtained from the

ethereal cyberspace at the click of a mouse, is bound to change with far reaching implications on our concept of and approach to the Tibetan book.

NOTES

- 1 The perspectivist debates on what is the shared object of perception among beings of the six realms when they converge to look at the bowl of water starts with Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, VI/71. In Tibetan, this debate has continued ever since the 13th century with a range of answers. Mipham treats this as one of the seven major Mādhyamika points of discussion in his treatise, *Nges shes rin po che'i sgron me*. See Mipham (1987). See also Padmakara Translation Group (2002), pp.241-4.
- 2 See Newell (2001).
- 3 I am using the words interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary interchangeably although there is in some cases an implicit understanding of interdisciplinary study as an approach involving persons from multiple disciplines whereas multidisciplinary study implies a person or persons adopting many disciplinary approaches to study a subject. The former can connote a cross-disciplinary approach and the latter a pan-disciplinary approach although this is very much a nominal distinction.
- 4 See Aris (1989), Pema Tshewang (1995) and Sarah Harding (2003).
- 5 See Karma Ma ñi, *rGyal ba'i dbang po thams cad mkhyen pa karma pa'i gsung gi phyag chen sngon 'gro bzhi sbyor nyams len cig tu bril ba*, 2r. Karma Ma ñi attributes the saying to Dus gsum mKhyen pa.
- 6 See Berlin (1999). Berlin cites from a fragment of Archilochus's poem: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing".
- 7 See Germano (2002), *History and Nature of The Collected Tantras of the Ancients*, p.1, <http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/canons/ngb/#wiki=/access/wiki/site/6a0a05fe-de5e-40f7-80f2-1ccfa2ab7d8e/history%20of%20ngb.html> (accessed on 8 September, 2009).
- 8 Seyfort Ruegg (1992), 'On the Tibetan historiography and doxography of the 'Great Debate' of bSam yas' in *Tibetan Studies (Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Narita 1989 = Monograph Series of Naritasan Institute for Buddhist Studies, Occasional Papers 2)*, ed. Ihara Shōren et al., pp. 237-244. Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji.
- 9 See Saṃyutta Nikāya, 22.87 PTS: S iii, where the Buddha advises Vakkali.
- 10 I have not been able to trace the origin of this verse in a sūtra although Tibetan scholars often cite this claiming it to be from a sūtra. mKhan po Kun bzang dPal ldan cites this from a certain *sNyan gyi gong rgyan*. See Kunzang Paldan, *Byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa'i tshig 'grel 'jam dbyangs bla ma'i zhal lung bdud brtsi'i thig pa*, Chengdu: Si khron Mi rigs dPe skrun khang, 1995, p. 249.
- 11 I partially owe this idea to Stephen Hugh-Jones and Hildegard Diemberger, who highlighted the notion of the book as a person and the agency of the book following Gell's agency of artefacts. See Gell, A, *Art and Agency*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- 12 See for instance the description of bsTan 'dzin Grags pa as the sole book or volume of the entire collection of scriptures and tantras by Tshul khirms rDo rje. Tshul khirms rDo rje (n.p.n.d), *dPal bstan 'dzin grags pa'i rnam thar dad pa'i shing rta bzang po*, 19v.
- 13 An example is Gling ras pa Padma rDo rje, who dressed up as a book after he was unsurpassed in debates. See dGe 'dun Rin chen (nd.n.p), *Lho 'brug chos byung*, f.42. The student of Ni ma Grags pa is also said to have dressed as a book and challenged Kong sprul Blo gros mTha' 'yas to a debate.

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