

Bhutan's Sacred Texts

Karma Phuntsho

Ananda! just as you have given affection, faith and respect to me now in this incarnation, just so, Ananda, should you act after my decease toward the Perfection of Wisdom. One should know that those beings live in the presence of the Buddha who hear this Perfection of Wisdom, take this up, study, spread, repeat and write this, and who honour, revere, adore and worship this.

The Buddha

When MIT's Michael Hawley created the world's largest book, *Bhutan: A Visual Odyssey Across the Last Himalayan Kingdom*, he perhaps did not know that there was already a tome in a remote temple in Bhutan which weighed more than his colossal 60kg opus. The tome is an illuminated manuscript of *The Eight Thousand Verses of the Perfection of Wisdom* in Gangteng Monastery weighing about 80kg and no less beautiful than Hawley's monumental work. Like hundreds of other texts, it was probably produced locally during heydays of Gangteng under the second Gangteng Tulku Tenzin Legpai Dhondup (1645-1726).

The scripture, called Gyatongpa in short, is one of the popular religious texts in the Tibetan Buddhist world. The Bhutanese tradition traces the origin of the Gyatongpa, like the rest of the Perfection of Wisdom corpus of teachings to which it belongs, to the historical Buddha. After the Buddha's death, the text is believed to have been taken to the subterranean world of serpents (naga) until Nagarjuna, the second century Indian master brought it back to the human world. Modern scholars however argue that this is a myth and the text actually may have been composed between 100 BC and 100 AD in south India. Whatever its beginning, the Gyatongpa has ever since spread across the globe, from Mongolia to Indonesia and from Korea to the Americas. It has been translated into many dozen languages and commented by scores of Buddhist scholars and meditation masters.

The Gyatongpa is a philosophical classic on the ways of perfecting wisdom, a central Mahayana practice of refining and transforming our perception of life and the world. Its two main messages are that one should aspire to be a Bodhisattva, a person who strives to take all sentient beings to enlightenment, and that there are no such things as Bodhisattva or sentient beings for everything is ultimately unreal and empty. For these essential themes of wisdom and compassion, the Gyatongpa and other scriptures on the Perfection of Wisdom came to be ranked as the central doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism and hold immense religious significance.

It is thus no surprise that the Gyatongpa in Gangteng is produced in exquisite calligraphy, written partially in gold and silver, adorned with intricate art, embellished in extravagant silk and wood covers, and accorded a highly venerable status. 'The Gyatongpa is the most commonly decorated Buddhist scripture,' claims Karma Delek, a Tibetan manuscript specialist. Veneration of Gyatongpa and other Perfection of Wisdom texts appear also in other forms of practice. 'In the old days, only families with a complete set of Perfection of Wisdom scriptures can hoist a tall flag in front of their house to honour the presence of holy books. Nowadays, people hoist tall flags in front their houses with no significance', laments Tshewang Dargey, an Ura village elder.

But it is not just the Gyatongpa which deserves veneration and worship. 'Since all scriptures embody the precious teachings of the Buddha and the paths and practices which lead a person to enlightenment, the respectful treatment should be extended to all scriptures', advises Khenpo Tshewang Sonam, an eminent Bhutanese scholar. As in the cult of the books in ancient India and China, Bhutanese people view the books as holy objects in their own right. Just as a stupa represents the enlightened mind of the Buddha, the books are the representation of the Buddha's speech. The books are cherished not merely as reading materials but as powerful relics. Thus, they are produced with great care to very high artistic and scribal standards, and are carefully wrapped and stored in the upper sanctums of the temple space, from where they radiate blessings upon the whole environment. They are worshipped, circumambulated and prostrated to. Occasionally they are paraded through the valley to bless the environment and protect it from natural calamities.

Books like the Gyatongpa are also read for both ritual and academic purposes. During the ritual readings, the monks or lay priests loudly read through the book without any attempt to understand them. Many Gyatongpa editions are specifically designed and produced for this purpose and are read very frequently. Such ritual reading is usually done to accumulate merit, remedy illnesses, dispel obstacles or as a funerary rite.

In addition to the profuse ritual use, books such as the Gyatongpa are also seriously studied by scholars and many are included in the monastic curriculum or used as references. To the Buddhist virtuosi, the scriptural corpuses constitute the words of the Buddha and their proper use lies in the scholarly study and practical application of the content. Reading and reflection are chief components of the Buddhist spiritual training. Rituals are merely skill methods to lead the world to the higher goal of enlightenment. Thus, the books are viewed as profound scriptures which are to be read and understood, and as sources of inspiration and wisdom.

The role of books, such as the Gyatongpa, is thus multifarious and considerable. The use of text permeates all facets of the Himalayan Buddhist life although no single volume represents Buddhism, as the Bible and Koran do for Christianity and Islam. 'The Himalayan Buddhist culture', says Prof. David Germano of Virginia University, 'is culture of the Text.' It is a culture, where books are respected for more than their utilitarian and educational value as reading materials. The book, to sum up the Bhutanese 'book-view', is the Buddha (author) in written form. 'In the last of the five hundred cycles, I shall return in the body of letters. Think of them as me; respect and honour them', were one of the Buddha's last words. They instil a different, a positive attitude toward books.