

A library in exile

Clare Harrington, participant in the University of Tasmania's Tibetan Partnership Program

We took off our shoes and opened the door. Veils of incense hung in the air, the tables were only two foot high, designed for the patron to study from a cross-legged position, small frescos decorated the architraves and a golden Buddha adorned with a white ceremonial scarf (a kata) watched over all.

I was in the Shantarakshita Library of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh India. I was studying Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan history as part of the University of Tasmania's Tibetan Partnership Program, and this was our library tour.

After the Chinese invaded Tibet, and negotiations with the Chinese to secure autonomy and religious freedom failed, the Dalai Lama and many Tibetans became refugees in India. Many monks escaped with the Buddhist sutras and commentaries which form an integral part of Buddhist philosophy. These no longer exist in Sanskrit, but do exist in Tibetan.

The Indian Government recognised the importance of maintaining the Tibetan culture and religion and set up the Institute in 1967 to 'resuscitate the past glory that lies ensconced in the precious Buddhist scriptures on religion and philosophy, art and architecture, science and technology, and astronomy and medicine'.

The Institute translates and teaches these Buddhist canons to Tibetans and students who traditionally would have studied in Tibet.

To be eligible to study here both monastic and lay students have to display a remarkable intelligence and determination — the studies (up to post-graduate level) take nine years to complete. Some monks will go on to complete their Geshe studies — a twenty-two-year course.

The manuscripts are not in book form. They are written on long strips of unbound paper, six centimetres wide and forty centimetres long, held in place by a hard front and back cover and wrapped in orange cloth with a strap holding the package together. A tongue of cloth escapes from one side giving cataloguing details. The packages are arranged in glass cabinets on either side of the Buddha statue.

This was the Tibetan section of the library. The other sections resemble a conventional library but together they formed a very comprehensive rare Buddhist collection. The different sections were arranged in a traditional Tibetan style, on three floors around a central courtyard enclosing a little garden. This gave the library a beautiful feeling of space, fresh air and calm.

Bees had made their home on one of the main pillars and a large spider tiptoed off the catalogue cards as my



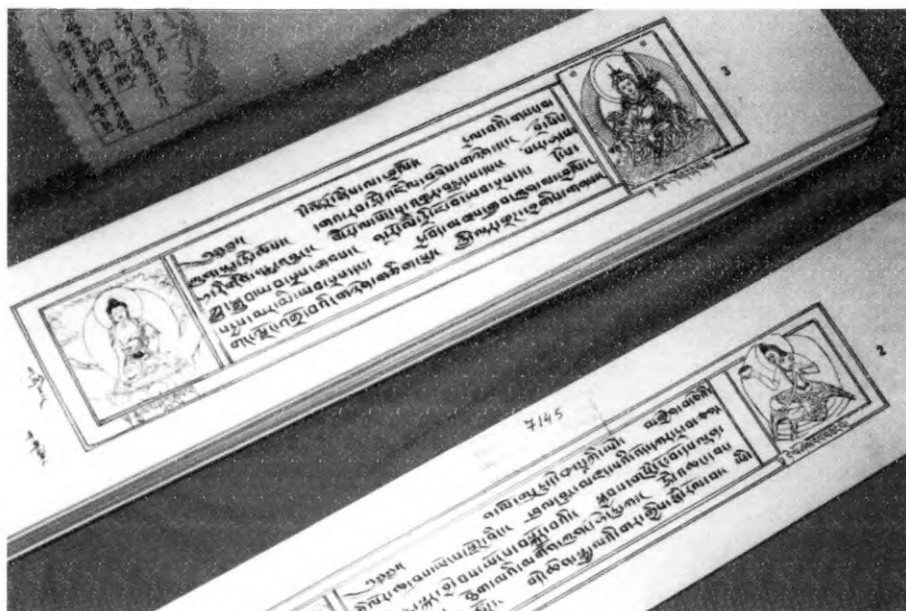
The library is arranged in a traditional Tibetan style: housed on three floors around a central courtyard with a small garden

friend looked for books on Tibetan medicine — at this point I decided to stick to the computerised catalogue!

The cataloguing system is based on Ranganathan's system of classification. I am ashamed to say I balked at discussing this system with the librarian. I remembered cold sweats when I first encountered Dewey, and the angst of swirling letters and figures when I try to find any thing in the University (Library of Congress). I was sure Ranganathan would induce dark holes of unfathomable depths in my brain. I smile now — the wheel having turned yet again as I am presented with cataloguing the library books for the Hobart branch of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). I happily took on the task confident that as a librarian I would be the best qualified for the job. On a recent visit to Adelaide I met a wonderful librarian who had dedicated hundreds of hours to her extensive FPMT library. I peeked at her cataloguing cards 'Yes, well, I used Library of Congress but you know Ranganathan is what the Tibetan library in Sarnath recommends'.

So it seems that Ranganathan and I are destined to meet, however shy I am.

Om mani padme hum... ■



Some of the manuscripts in the library collection