

Approaching the book: Tibetan text-handling practices and the social relations they entail

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As have Buddhists of other traditions, Tibetans have directed a tremendous amount of attention to the physical forms in which their texts move through the world. This paper looks at Tibetan practices that surrounding written texts as material objects, and seeks to explore the ideas about texts implied and propagated by these practices.

Even as they direct our gaze to the physical form of written texts, Tibetan Buddhist book-handling practices offer stiff resistance to the commodification that becomes possible as soon as one focuses on the text as a physical object. Consequently, a written text in Tibet is a very different sort of object from other objects. Such texts are explicitly and intentionally granted tremendous agency over individuals in Tibet. They consequently stand in a very different relationship to their users than other objects do, and act on them in fundamentally different ways. Just how the status and power of these written texts are constituted and articulated is a main concern of this paper. I will argue that the ideas about what a written text is, and the practices through which these ideas are articulated and actualized are crucial to the reception and transmission of these texts in Tibet.

As a guide to this territory, I will take up the remarkably explicit practical instructions given in the Tibetan tradition to users as to how written texts should be approached and handled that are often transmitted as part of refuge advice in texts of the lam rim genre. Approaching the texts in the way prescribed establishes certain very distinctive relationships between persons and texts, and we will see that those relationships allow the text to act on the persons in its orbit in certain ways. We may therefore read the instructions with an eye to detecting these processes in action.

The particular set of instructions this paper will examine is taken from a 15th century work Tsongkhapa, the *byang chub lam rim chen mo*. These instructions demand that we construe the written text as a physical object entirely *sui generis*, and configure such texts as powerful objects. Over and again, attention is drawn to the written text as a physical thing, at the same time as utmost effort is made to prevent it from being seen as a mere thing, and this tension has proven an extremely productive force in the shaping of Tibetan textual practices. The tension within the dual understanding of a text as a locus of meaning and as a material object in the world emerges at times as a source of wonder, at times as a potential problem and at others as an opportunity.

For example, the anecdotes accompanying the instructions provide an image of ways in which enacting the sanctioned behavior in regards to the written text empowers users

in their social relations with others, and likewise provide an image of the devastating consequences of mishandling them.

The paper will also cast a wider look to see how these very precise prescriptions and proscriptions are rooted in fundamental notions about writing, particularly in connection with the progressive extinction of the teachings of the Buddha. We will consider the traditional tale of the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet, in which it is said to have fallen quite literally from the sky in the form of a written text, landing on the roof of the king's palace. Although no one was able to read the Sanskrit letters, we are told this manuscript was carefully preserved for generations, granting sight to the blind who worshipped it, awaiting the day when readers would be born who could unlock the text's verbal meaning text. In this, we find a distinctive vision of the role of the literary community and of physical text themselves in generating and transmitting such potent knowledge.

Through its exploration of such images and practices, the paper will argue that Tibetan Buddhist approaches to written texts reflect and produce distinctive ideas about how knowledge is created and moves in the world. Together, these ideas and practices surrounding the handling of physical texts work to discipline individuals and communities to orient themselves in certain ways towards the embodiments of that knowledge, in order to learn from and be transformed by them, but also as sources of social power and prosperity.