



# Tibetan Buddhism Beyond the Land of Snows

by Matthew Pistono and Jamphel Lhundup

Padmasambhava, an 8th-century meditation master, firmly established Buddhism in Tibet, the land of snows. Known to Tibetans as Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava prophesied, “When the Iron Bird flies and horses run on wheels, Tibetans will scatter like ants and the Dharma [the teachings of the Buddha] will spread to the West, beyond the land of snows.” And in fact, after the first airplanes landed in Tibet carrying military representatives of Mao Zedong’s regime and China’s armored vehicles invaded a roadless Tibet from western China, the embodied symbol of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism, the 14th Dalai Lama, fled south across the Himalayas.

With the Dalai Lama’s escape in 1959, and that of the more than 100,000 Tibetans who followed, came the diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism beyond the land of snows. Over the last 40 years, this diffusion has spawned monastic institutions throughout the Indian subcontinent, brought the study of Tibetan Buddhism to the classrooms of major Western universities, and led to the establishment by Tibetan lamas (teachers) of spiritual communities in Europe and North America.

## BEFORE CHINESE-OCCUPIED TIBET

For over a thousand years, personal and communal resources in Tibet were utilized to further the aims of the spiritual community, which included large monastic institutions, mountain hermitages for meditating ascetics, and secluded nunneries. A mutually beneficial relationship

existed between the laity and the ordained monks and nuns: the laity offered material necessities such as food and clothing, while the monastic community provided spiritual guidance and leadership. Even though some unscrupulous monks and ambitious bureaucrats took advantage of this system for personal gain, on the whole the leaders who developed Tibetan social, religious, and political structures showed deep concern for the spiritual well-being of both the individual and the community. While pre-1959 Tibet was not a utopia, nor did it match its Hollywood depiction as Shangri-La, it was a highly devout society that produced some of the most sophisticated philosophical reflections in world thought.

This system changed dramatically when China invaded Tibet, razing over 6,000 monasteries and nunneries, burning thousands of libraries, and bombarding sacred *chödens* (Buddhist monuments) and grottos to ruins. Tens of thousands of monks and nuns, teachers, scholars, and devout lay people lost their lives for their religious beliefs, forever altering the spiritual teaching lineages\* and the sacred landscape of Tibet.

## TIBETAN BUDDHISM BEYOND THE LAND OF SNOWS

Re-establishing monasteries in the refugee communities in India and Nepal was critical to sustaining the cultural and spiritual traditions of the

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\* A lineage is an unbroken line of successive masters through which are transmitted the oral instructions on particular religious texts and spiritual practices.





Monks at Rumtek Monastery near Gangtok, Sikkim, lift a larger-than-life-size mask of Padmasambhava, worn by a monk. Padmasambhava firmly established Buddhism in Tibet. Photo by Don Farber

Tibetans. Initiated by the many lamas who fled Tibet in the late 1950s and early 1960s, monasteries were established in virtually every refugee community and Buddhist pilgrimage site on the southern slope of the Himalayas. By the early 1970s, the Tibetan government-in-exile assisted in setting up large monasteries on land provided by the Indian government. These monasteries today house several thousand monks each and maintain most of the traditional customs, although some communal agricultural work is required of able-bodied monks.

A notable development in India within the last 20 years has been the revitalization of the nun tradition. Although monks and nuns are meant to have equal opportunities, in Tibet this was not the case. In exile, however, with the Dalai Lama's support and the dedication and initiative of the nuns themselves, religious and educational opportunities are now being instituted for them.

Within the last decade, some nunneries and monasteries in India and Nepal have merged the traditional religious curriculum of philosophy, debate, and analytical contemplation with a modern curriculum of computer, Internet, and English-language course work.

### TIBETAN BUDDHIST STUDIES AND DHARMA CENTERS

Tibetan Buddhism's influence has stretched far beyond the Indian subcontinent, manifesting itself in North America primarily in the establishment of Tibetan Buddhist studies in universities and of Dharma Centers by Tibetan meditation teachers and their Western students.

Tibetan Buddhist studies in North America were developed by Westerners who had traveled and lived in India and Nepal in the 1960s. These spiritual seekers traded their encounter with the solitary meditator's life in the Himalayas to become the new generation of scholars, translators, and commentators of ancient religious texts in modern university classrooms.

This new wave of Tibetan Buddhist scholars differs from the 19th- and 20th-century "Orientalists" for whom the study of Tibetan Buddhism — which they termed pejoratively "Lamaism" — was one primarily of textual philology. These philologists subordinated the study of Tibetan Buddhism to that of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhism. The new Western scholars focus more on the teaching lineages of living Tibetans, bringing refugee lamas into the classroom to explain their traditions. Instead of grappling solely with the literal translations of the ancient religious texts, these new Western univer-





Students at a Dharma Center review notes before a meditation session. Tibetan Buddhist meditation and philosophy are taught in Dharma Centers not only by refugee lamas but Westerners as well. Dharma Centers are a completely new phenomenon in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Photo courtesy Rocky Mountain Shambhala Center

sity professors and their students explore potential applications of Tibetan Buddhist traditions such as analytical meditations and scholarly debate.

Dharma Centers are spiritual communities for Westerners that formed under the spiritual guidance of Tibetan lamas. The myriad forms of Tibetan Buddhist practice have resulted in a variety of Buddhist practices being taught in North America. An expression in Tibet that conveys this notion of diversity states, "In every valley a different dialect, with every lama a different spiritual lineage." While some Tibetan lamas, for example, have merged Western free verse poetry with Buddhist formless meditation, others have emphasized traditional disciplined study and the fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy. Spontaneity and esoteric rituals have been the focus of some lamas at Dharma Centers, while more conventional lamas have developed and concentrated on a curriculum of study similar to that of their monastery.

Although a handful of Dharma Centers have seen episodes of misunderstanding and controversy between Tibetan lamas and their students, the centers established in the past 30 years have laid the foundation for the flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism in the West — by some estimates, the second fastest growing religion in North America.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the seeds of Tibetan Buddhism will firmly take root. Perhaps in the next three decades, a culture of ethics, concentration, and wisdom will emerge out of Westerners' practice of Tibetan Buddhism. On the other hand, maybe the profound wisdom contained in the many teachings, seminars, and books that Tibetan Buddhist lineage holders have offered to the West will only be used to reduce stress and provide relaxation.

### THE CHANGING FACE OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

As much as Tibetan Buddhists have changed the spiritual landscape of India and academic and spiritual communities in the West, so, too, are the Tibetans themselves changing. Had the Iron Bird not flown into Tibet, Tibetan monasteries would probably not be posting Buddhist teachings on the Internet today. Had military tanks not fired on quiet mountainside nunneries, devoted Tibetan nuns would not have fled Tibet and ultimately revitalized the nun tradition in refugee communities. And while in Tibet the majority of meditators were ordained monks and nuns supported by the material resources of the lay community, in the West the laity are the meditators as well as the



financial supporters of Tibetan Buddhism. But perhaps the clearest example of the changing face of Tibetan Buddhism beyond the land of snows can be found in the 14th Dalai Lama himself.

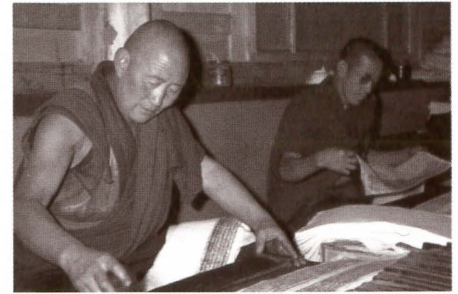
Enthroned at the age of four, the Dalai Lama was positioned to temporally and spiritually lead his people from inside the massive and secluded Potala Palace in Tibet's capital, Lhasa. He has emerged, as history has seen, from the cloistered walls of the Potala to become one of the world's most recognizable leaders.

From convening symposiums on "Mind Science" with Harvard and Columbia professors and medical professionals to giving commentary on the New Testament to the World Community for Christian Meditation in England, the Dalai Lama consistently engages those outside the traditional Buddhist world. The 14th Dalai Lama fills social, political, and religious roles never known to the previous thirteen Dalai Lamas in Tibet. His many books on ethics and compassion have found a vast audience in the West, and his tireless advocacy for human rights on the world political stage and for a non-violent resolution to the current occupation of Tibet, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, confirms the Dalai Lama's impact on matters far beyond the traditional leadership of Tibetans.

The drastic changes in the role of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism reaffirm the fundamental Buddhist tenet that all things must change. If it is true that all dependent things must change, it is hoped that the forces that continue to keep the Dalai Lama and over 100,000 Tibetans separated from their homeland will also change, and Tibetan Buddhism from "beyond" will return to the land of snows.

## BUDDHISM IN CONTEMPORARY TIBET

All major Tibetan religious leaders have fled Tibet in the last 40 years. Few of Tibet's once-thriving monasteries and nunneries or sacred hermitages and *chôtens* remain standing since Tibet's invasion by Chinese forces. Despite this exodus and destruction, and continued severe restrictions on religious expression in Tibet today, Buddhist practice is still alive due solely to the devotion and resilience of the Tibetans inside Tibet. The ability of Tibetans to withstand the oppression in their homeland is testimony to the vitality and strength of the Tibetans' resolve to express their religion freely.



Two monks print Buddhist scriptures for monastic libraries at the famous printing presses of Derge, Kham, in eastern Tibet. Thousands of monastic libraries throughout Tibet have been destroyed in the last 40 years of Chinese occupation. Photo by Carol Elchert

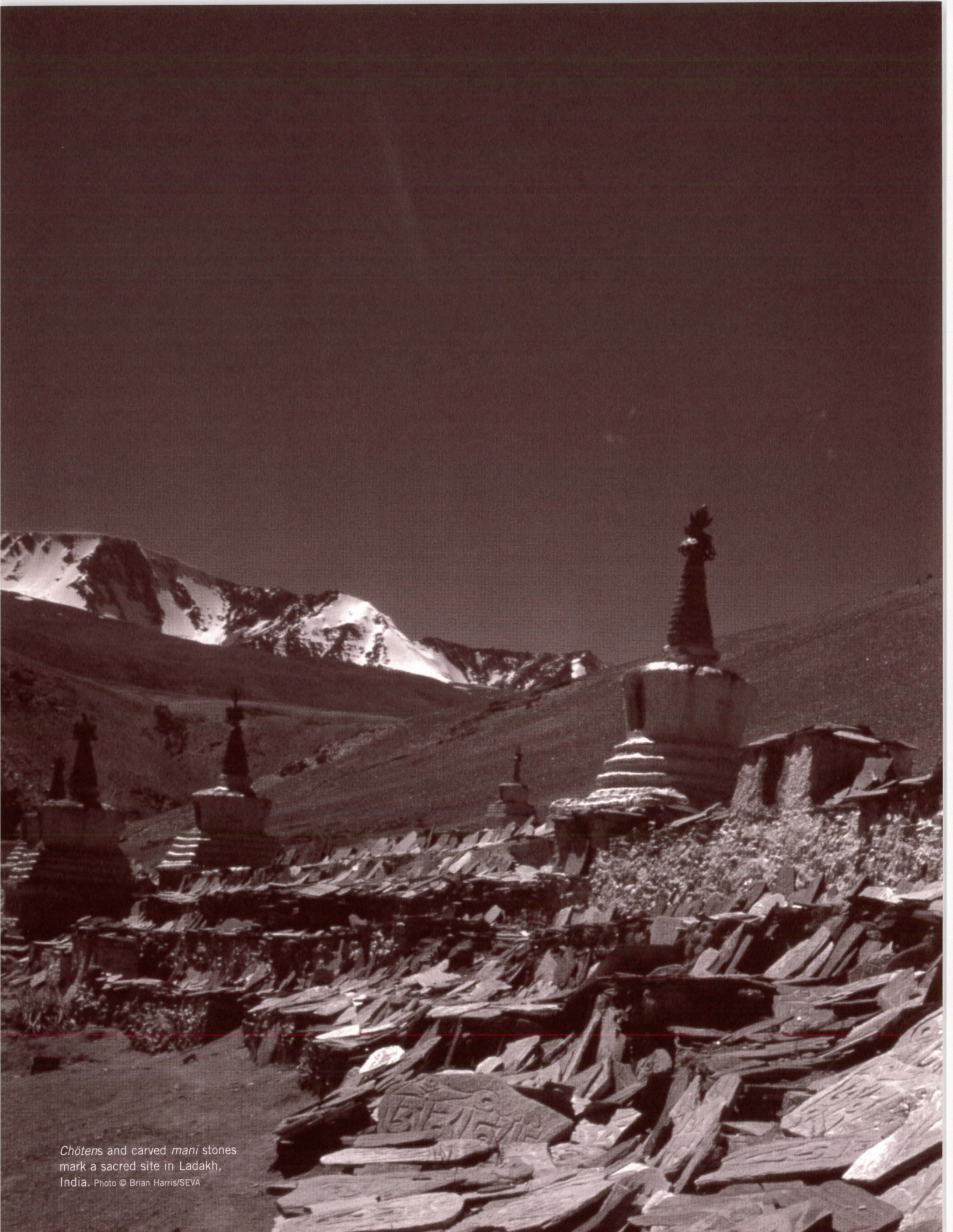
### Suggested Reading

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*Chötens and carved mani stones mark a sacred site in Ladakh, India. Photo © Brian Harris/SEVA*