

# tibetans

## must preserve their culture

Photo Sonam Zoksang



Musician Tenzin Ngawang travels the New York subway

Tibetan culture is a fund of wisdom established through translation and original composition by ancient scholars, saints, translators, kings, and ministers through much hardship. "Culture" is a huge category, which includes the objects of knowledge and the terminology, which describes it. To preserve the texts of the intellectual tradition in libraries is one way to preserve knowledge. But the most important means is through the study of the cultural tradition, its application in daily life and its transmission to others. This refers to hearing, reflection, and meditation, and to teaching, debating, and composition.

Efforts made these days to maintain Tibetan culture are weak, and if we aren't careful, will become weaker. In Tibet the Chinese Communist Party, with its "Democratic Reform," its "Cultural Revolution" and its "movement to destroy the old and establish the new," etc., has profoundly damaged Tibetan culture. Nowadays its representatives speak of a policy of relaxation but in Tibetan schools, Chinese language and the Party's political theory are the Tibetans' main course of study. Those who mainly pursue the mastery of Chinese language and the Party doctrine get the jobs. Inside Tibet it is both difficult and dangerous to preserve Tibetan culture.

It is my experience these days that few Tibetans under 30 know how to speak and read Tibetan. In India, there are many

Tibetan schools but those who know English well outnumber those who know Tibetan well. And in daily use English and Hindi are far more common. When Tibetan is spoken, English and Hindi words have been mixed in. For example, "pura" ["all" or "whole," Tib: *tsang ma*], "ata" ["brown flour," Tib: *dro shib*], "aloo" ["potato," Tib: *shogok*], "chini" ["sugar," Tib: *jema kara*], "telephone" [Tib: *kha bar*], "taxi," [Tib: *la gyuk numkhor*] "bus" [Tib: *dimdul numkhor*], and many other such words have now become established in Tibetan speech. Perhaps if one were to ask young Tibetans what the Tibetan terms for these foreign words might be they would have a hard time answering. At the Tibetan University in Varanasi, His Holiness the Dalai Lama came to listen to the students debating. Upon hearing the word "pura" he said, "What are you saying! Are there no Tibetan words in our texts for such terms?" If Tibetan language is weak among the most educated, among the general populace it would not be surprising if speech has deteriorated even further.

Similarly, an invitation to a Tibetan religious event was printed in English but the guests to whom it was sent were mainly Tibetans. Either this shows that the Tibetan language can't be used to compose an invitation, or else that Tibetans don't know Tibetan. Thus Tibetans themselves do the work of destroying Tibetan culture.

VEN. DHONGTHOG RINPOCHE'S article on the impending disintegration of Tibetan culture originally appeared in The Tibetan Times, the Tibetan language newspaper printed in Dharamsala, India. Aimed at Tibetan youth, the article is a wake-up call. This is an edited transcript.



In America, I have observed that Tibetan youth have a very poor knowledge of spoken and written Tibetan, let alone Tibetan culture. For example, in 1997 the Office of Tibet in New York sent some documents of their resolutions to the Washington State Regional Tibetan Association to post. The staff of the Association couldn't read them, so they ignored them. The lessons of Tibetan school children are in English, the children speak to their school friends in English, and except for those who went to a Tibetan school in India, none of them know Tibetan. If they did go to a Tibetan school in India, then after they arrive here they don't use spoken or written Tibetan much and so forget what little they know. Of those who work, very few have regard for their own culture and regard English more highly than the Dharma, studying it energetically along with their full-time job.

The foundation of Tibetan culture is the written language. Since that is so, when writing in the language of [formal] composition and the language of [informal] correspondence, or even a memorandum or anything whatsoever, one must keep a complete and reliable dictionary close at hand [so that] when there is doubt about some minor point, one can consult the dictionary to establish the conventions for correct usage of each word. This is an important method in guarding Tibetan culture. These days those who are said to be learned in Tibetan, whether writing by hand or on the word processor, make many mistakes. This is the fault of not regularly consulting the dictionary. Whether it's Tibetan, English or any other language, no one can write well without using the dictionary.

When I was young I studied poetry at the feet of the great scholar and yogin Kyabje Rapsel Dawa (H.E. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche). He said, "The study of religious texts and the study of secular literature are different. With religious texts it is fine merely to memorize and receive the oral explanation. But it is insufficient merely to learn secular literature from an oral explanation. You have to write." I recall that still.

I appeal to all Tibetans. Led by scholars in the Tibetan [international community] the time has come to launch a powerful movement to reverse the grave reality of the decline of Tibetan culture. We must strive to preserve this precious heritage so this light, which brings benefit in the present and the future does not vanish, but long endures on this earth. ☸

Ven. T.G. Dhongthog Rinpoche was recognized as the fifth reincarnation of Jampal Rigpai Raldri by H.H. Sakya Dagchen Ngawang Kunga Rinchen of Drolma Palace. Rinpoche is the head teacher of Dhongthog Rigdrol Phuntsog Ling Monastery, Kardze, Tibet. He studied Tibetan literature and Buddhist philosophy at Dzongsar Institute, Dege, Tibet. He left Tibet in 1957 and lived

in India till 1979, where he served Tibet's government-in-exile for 13 years, and where he learnt English and Hindi. Dhongthog Rinpoche immigrated to the United States of America in the summer of 1979. He founded Sapan Institute in Seattle, USA, in 1987 for the study, composition, translation, and publication of Tibetan Buddhist culture. His literary works include an English-Tibetan dictionary, and a history of the Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism, *The Timely Shower*.



Photo Tenzin Dhongthog

Tibetan dance troupe performing in Washington, DC

## LOVE & FREEDOM

*Love India love Tibet*

*I am tired,*

*I am tired doing that 10th March ritual<sup>1</sup>,  
screaming from the hills of Dharamsala*

*I am tired,*

*I am tired selling sweaters on the roadside,  
40 years sitting, waiting in dust and spit*

*I am tired,*

*eating rice'n dal  
and grazing cows in the jungles of Karnataka*

*I am tired,*

*I am tired dragging my lungi  
in the dirt of Manju-Tila*

*I am tired,*

*I am tired fighting for the country  
I have never seen.*

*by Tenzin Tsundue [Bombay]*

<sup>1</sup> March 10 is the anniversary of the Lhasa uprising, Tibet, 1959.