

Preserving Tibetan Cultural Heritage

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Central Asia

As the situation deteriorated in Tibet, the odds for Akong Tulku's refugee party looked more unfavourable each day of their perilous journey to India. Leaving behind the familiar and accommodating world of Eastern Tibet, which they had enjoyed and cherished for as long as their memories reached, they now found themselves displaced and lost in the freezing winter of the southern mountain ranges of Tibet, all of a sudden fugitives in their own land. After many months of arduous hardships, their group, which included the 11th Trungpa Tulku, the leader of the party, had dwindled from several hundreds to just a little more than a dozen. Too hungry and exhausted to move, they huddled together in a Himalayan cave, waiting for death to take them one by one. Fortunately, local hunters chanced upon them and took pity. Having thus escaped certain death through the kindness of strangers, Akong Tulku resolved to dedicate his remaining life to providing aid and refuge to people in distress, in Tibet and elsewhere.

By Pim Willems

It was with this defining experience in mind that Akong Tulku Rinpoche founded, in 1980, the humanitarian aid organization Rokpa, which in Tibetan signifies 'help'. Headed by Rokpa International in Switzerland, 17 branches in 16 countries raise funds for projects in education, healthcare, environment, culture, and social economy. At present, there are 135 projects in Tibet alone. Through publication of rare Tibetan texts, many of which are on the verge of being lost forever, preservation of Tibetan cultural heritage is actively sought. These efforts have so far resulted in two multi-volume collections: Tibetan medical texts and Kagyupa college texts. These collections will be entrusted to the care of libraries all over the world, in the hope to better preserve Tibetan heritage, which has proven to be so vulnerable to the vicissitudes of history.

Since 1998, members of Rokpa have actively searched many regions of Tibet for rare medical texts, while also trying to locate commentaries on the basic texts and documents identifying crucial medicinal herbs. The collected texts are electronically edited and arranged into volumes, while prefaces, illustrations, and footnotes are added. Ultimately, Rokpa Tibet and the Sichuan Minority Printing House will print some twenty-seven 600-page volumes of Tibetan medical texts.

Of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism: the Gel-

ugpa, Sakyapa, Nyingmapa, and Kagyupa, the first three have their own college texts. To ensure that in Kagyupa college students can be taught from their own textbooks, and to save Kagyupa traditional knowledge from being lost, Rokpa International has decided to locate and collect all texts of the Kagyupa system of instruction in the ten traditional sciences or areas of learning. In a joint venture with the Xining Printing Press, 2,000 copies of the twenty-volume Kagyupa textbook collection will be printed for Tibetan colleges, universities, and libraries all over the world. The contents include:

poetry and modes of expression, dramatic and creative arts, the healing arts, valid cognition, graduated path, *abhidharma*, *madhyamika*, *prajnaparamita*, treatises relating sutra and tantra, commonalities of tantra, and commentaries on tantra.

The first copies were formally presented to the Kern Institute Library at Leiden University during the IIAS-initiated cultural event 'Appreciating Tibet in the West', held in November 2002 at the occasion of the official presentation of the proceedings of the ninth seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. <

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Tibetological Collections & Archives Series

Pim Willem's article on 'Preserving Tibetan Cultural Heritage' is the tenth contribution to the Tibetological Collections & Archives Series, which is devoted to important projects on cataloguing, 'computerization' (inputting and scanning), editing, and translation of important Tibetan language text-collections and archives. In this series various colleagues briefly present their initiatives to a larger public, or update the scholarly world on the progress of their already well-established projects. Some are high-profile projects, of which at least Tibetologists will generally be aware, yet some may also be less well known. Nevertheless, I trust that it will be useful to be informed or updated on all these initiatives and I also hope that the projects presented will profit from the exposure and the response that this coverage will engender. If you are interested in any of the projects described, feel free to contact the author of the article. In case you would like to introduce your own (planned) work in the field, please contact the editors of the *IIAS Newsletter* or the author of this introduction. We should very much like to encourage our contributors to keep us informed on the progress of their projects by means of regular updates. <

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