



While recent **protests** continue to highlight the fractious nature of relations between **China and Tibet**, one group of **monks in Indian exile** are dedicating themselves to keeping their threatened Tibetan traditions alive. And they're **prepared to go on tour** in order to do so

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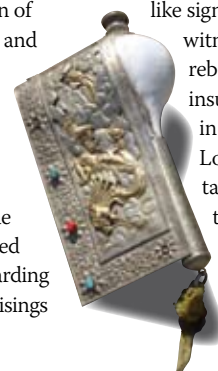
The horn-like call of the conch rings out at dawn and summons the monks to butter tea and morning prayers. Dressed in maroon robes, they cross the courtyard to the prayer hall of the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. It's decorated in typical Tibetan style with two golden deer flanking the 'wheel of dharma' – one of the symbols of Buddhism.

The one incongruous ingredient is the large palm tree next to the monastery, which makes it clear we're not in Tibet, nor Dharamsala in the Himalayan region of India where the Dalai Lama has his government in exile. This Tashi Lhunpo monastery is in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, about 80km from Mysore. The settlement of Bylakuppe actually boasts the largest congregation of Tibetan monks outside Tibet in a number of monasteries built on land donated by the Indian government after the Chinese crushed the Lhasa uprising of 1959. The original Tashi Lhunpo ('Heap of Glory') monastery in Shigatse, Tibet's second largest city, is traditionally the seat of the Panchen Lama, the most important spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism after the Dalai Lama.

The issue of Tibetan autonomy and religious freedom has hit the headlines with protests in Lhasa and elsewhere. The Dalai Lama has accused China of a "reign of terror" in Tibet, but condemned the violence and appealed for calm. After the formation of the People's Republic in 1949, China lost little time in claiming Tibet and sent in troops in 1950. A peace agreement in 1951 granted autonomy, but not independence, and guaranteed freedom of worship and use of the Tibetan language. However China soon started slicing off territories in eastern Tibet and awarding them to neighbouring provinces. Armed uprisings

started which culminated in a full-scale Chinese invasion in 1959. The Dalai Lama fled to India and Lhasa was shelled. The real ransacking of Tibet's monasteries took place during the Cultural Revolution (roughly 1966-76), which hit Tibet harder than anywhere else in China. Unlike the Dalai Lama, the tenth Panchen Lama remained in Tibet trying to promote good relations with the Chinese. He was imprisoned for nearly a decade in China and remained there on his release with only occasional visits to Tashi Lhunpo in the 80s. He died in the monastery in January 1989. Now there's a quarrel over the selection of the 11th Panchen Lama [see box], which is another cause of conflict with the Chinese of particular concern to Tashi Lhunpo.

One monk clashes a pair of cymbals – played horizontally in the Tibetan style rather than vertically as in the West – and simultaneously strikes a temple drum with a curved stick. Five tantric monks with long, dark fringes and ceremonial head dresses start to chant. This is called *Kunrik* (All-Knowing), a ritual of chanting and hand gestures in which the monks form the symbols of 37 deities being visualised in their meditation. With fingers being raised, hands opened and cupped, it looks like sign language in slow motion. It's said that simply witnessing these gestures means you will not be reborn in the lower realms. It seems a good insurance policy, particularly as I'm witnessing this in a 12-minute version in the Purcell Room in London, rather than the five-and-a-half-hours it takes in the monastery. "The main thing for us is to try and preserve our culture," explains Kelkhang Rinpoche, the general secretary and a member of the monastery for about 25 years. "As you know, the Chinese are restricting religion in >>

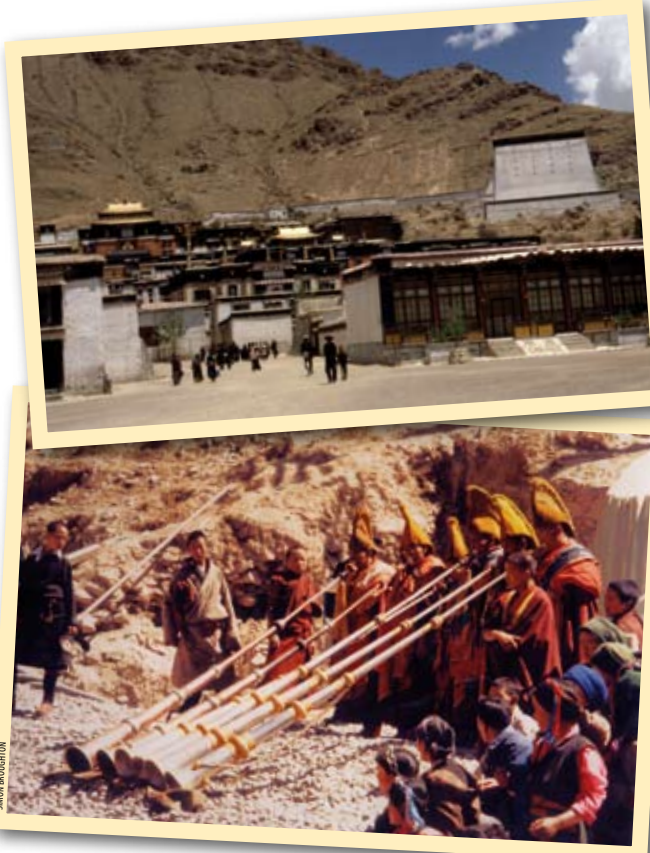


GARETH HANE



The Tashi Lhunpo monks, with Kachen Lobzang Tuskor (middle, front row), the chant master who leads all of the prayers and mantras featured on the *Dawn Till Dusk* album
Opposite: a mandala and conch (bottom)

GARETH HANE



Tibet. It's difficult, but we have everything we need here – our studies, the music and the dance.”

The Tashi Lhunpo monks perform a masked Cham dance called 'Bakshi' (The Lords of Death), dating back to the 17th century and the fifth Panchen Lama. Each mask has a crown of skulls. Kachen Lhakdor, one of the elderly monks, remembered the dances from Tashi Lhunpo and rewrote the document describing them from memory after he came to the monastery in exile. Another dance, 'Dur Dak' (Lords of the Cemetery), features two skeletons. It's an illustration of impermanence – a reminder that however rich or powerful you may be, you are nothing but bones and can take nothing with you when you die. That acceptance of impermanence, however, isn't something that Rinpoche will extend to their ritual. "The first thing is we have to preserve our Tibetan culture and religion," he says. "The second thing is we want to show them to the world."

Putting religious ritual on stage can be difficult both for the performers and audience. Something like *qawwali* music from Pakistan transfers easily to the concert hall, but the *sema* ritual of the Whirling Dervishes, which is often performed on stage, can become more like a spectator sport than a religious ritual. The Tibetan dances are colourful, but don't they become mere showpieces when ripped out of context? "Even when we do this in the West, we don't feel this is a show," insists Rinpoche. "We try and recreate what we have in the monastery. If I'm doing meditation in the West, I am doing real meditation and not just showing it for the people. What I do in the monastery I do in Europe, it's the same thing."

Of course it's the dances that are most eye

Clockwise from top left: the original Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Shigatse; Tashi Lhunpo in exile in Bylakuppe; trumpets for the giant buddha, in 1986



catching for the audience. But watching the ritual and listening to the chant, I found myself being drawn in. Tibet is a spectacular and awesome place, but the environment is austere and hard. So too the ritual music. The chants rarely use more than three or four tones. The only instruments are the occasional cymbal crashes, ritual drums and bells. So you focus on the chant and the sound – for instance the incredibly pure ringing tone of hand bells delicately shaken

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between the fingers. This makes the occasional entrance of a pair of *gyangling* oboes and particularly the three-metre-long *dungchen* trumpets something incredible. At the end of an extended chant with absolutely no distractions of thunderous trumpets or bells, the woman sitting next to me said she found it "overwhelming." That's perhaps why the monks have now released *Dawn Till Dusk*, a CD that charts the prayers and chants of a day in the monastery with a brief burst of instrumental music separating the morning chants from the afternoon ones.

The Tashi Lhunpo monks aren't the only ones keeping Tibetan culture alive in exile. The most famous group is the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) in Dharamsala, north India, founded by the Dalai Lama in 1959 soon after his arrival from Tibet. While TIPA focus mainly on secular music and opera, the Gyuto Monks from the Tantric College now situated in McLeod

Ganj, have also toured widely and are famed for their deep, growly chanting. Buddhism is the fastest growing Eastern religion in the secular West, as it encourages enquiry rather than dogma. It comes with messages of peace and compassion. The Tashi Lhunpo monks are back for their third three-month tour in three years – appearing in venues from the Guildhall in Cambridge to WOMAD in Charlton Park, including a four-day residence in Nottingham while the Dalai Lama is talking and teaching at Nottingham Arena. There are also some dates scheduled for Spain. The tours visit small, intimate venues where people can really make contact with the music and its spiritual content.

The original Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Tibet was founded in 1447 by the first Dalai Lama. Painted a rusty red with a golden roof gleaming in the sunlight, it's like a fortress on the hillside overlooking the largely Chinese-built town of Shigatse. Tashi Lhunpo wasn't as extensively destroyed in the Cultural Revolution as many other Tibetan monasteries. There's a spectacular courtyard and prayer hall, a massive 25m high golden Buddha statue and a *stupa* (dome-shaped Buddhist shrine) of silver and gold built in 1662 for the remains of the fourth Panchen Lama. Around these large ceremonial buildings is a maze of narrow lanes and alleyways. I visited in 1986, when Tibet was first opened up to individual travellers – or as the Chinese charmingly termed us, 'disorganised tourists'. On my first visit there was a ritual underway in the prayer hall for a dead monk whose robes were in a pile by the entrance. There was a sand *mandala* – a ritual image made out of millions of grains of coloured sand and there was the chanting, the shawms, the cymbals, the drums and bells. It was my first experience

of Tibetan music and it was breathtaking.

I returned a week or so later for part of the three-day festival in June when a giant image of the Buddha is hung on what looks like gigantic drive-in movie-screen behind the monastery. As part of continuing liberalisation after the Cultural Revolution, this was the first time this had happened for over 20 years. Thousands of pilgrims were gathering from miles around, many of them prostrating themselves again and again on the ground. The vast wall was covered with a striped cloth which was dropped at midday to reveal the gigantic *thangka* (Buddha image), about 40m high. Simultaneously alongside it, six monks in their yellow caps started blowing the most enormous trumpets in the world that seemed to call from the depths of the earth. These *dungchen* trumpets, normally played in pairs, are said to alert the deities that prayers are about to start.

In 1959 there were some 5,000 monks in



Top: the Kunrik meditation. Left: making a sand mandala

Tashi Lhunpo. About 250 fled during the Chinese invasion, but many elders stayed alongside the Panchen Lama in Tibet. There are about 600 there today. The new monastery was established in 1972, under the guidance of the Dalai Lama, where there are now about 300 monks in residence.

The predominantly young monks in Tashi Lhunpo sing the chants from loose-leaf sheets on which the prayers are written. But amongst the treasures preserved in the monastery are amazing musical notations brought from Tibet. These are artworks in

their own right, the fine curves and curlicues outlining the contours of the chants, reminiscent of clouds in Buddhist paintings [see p30]. It's an extraordinary archive in an arcane notation only known to the *umze* (prayer leader) and a handful of monks.

On tour they bring one of their other traditions – the sand mandala, which they will create over several days in different locations across the UK including the Palace of Westminster prior to the visit of the Dalai Lama. "The name of the mandala is *Dorje Sempa*," explains Rinpoche. "It's for purification of the mind and is the initiation the Dalai Lama is giving on his final day of teaching. It represents impermanence – it's very beautiful and very hard to make, but then we destroy it and throw it in the water." Just like His Holiness, Rinpoche often breaks into laughter, but if anything it underlines the seriousness of their mission. "We are all hoping to go back to Tibet one day and when we go back we can transplant very quickly because we have preserved our culture. None of us knows when that will be, but if I can't go in this life I will go in the next." ●

The Panchen Lama

The world's youngest political prisoner

The Panchen (Great Scholar) Lama is believed to be a reincarnation of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. When the tenth Panchen Lama died in Tashi Lhunpo in 1989, the search immediately started for his reincarnation. Traditionally the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama have been involved in the search for the other's reincarnation, but the Dalai Lama's request to the Chinese authorities was refused. In May 1995, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima (pictured), a six-year-old boy born north of Lhasa, was officially proclaimed by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the tenth Panchen Lama. Within days the boy and his parents were seized by the Chinese. "The boy was at risk of being kidnapped by separatists and his security had been threatened," claim the authorities. In November 1995 the Chinese authorities named their own choice of Panchen Lama, six-year-old Gyaltsen Norbu. Many monks who've protested against the Chinese choice, including Chadrel Rinpoche, the abbot of Tashi Lhunpo who had been appointed head of China's search committee for the 11th Panchen Lama, have been imprisoned. The whereabouts of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, said to be the world's youngest political prisoner, is unknown.



The Tashi Lhunpo monks are on tour in the UK from May 5. See On the Road for more details. www.tashi-lhunpo.org.uk Dawn Till Dusk is reviewed in this issue