

A Glimpse into the World of Buddhist Publishing: Shambhala Publications

Nikko Odiseos

It is about a ten-minute walk across Christian Science Plaza, the headquarters of our former landlord, the Church of Latter-day Saints, from Shambhala Publication's old office in the Back Bay of Boston, where from 1984 to 2015 we grew from a niche publisher to a larger small publisher, or a smaller medium sized publisher depending on your ruler's scale. At the other end of the plaza is Bukowski's Tavern, named after the cantankerous poet and writer. When I joined the company as president in 2010, one of my colleagues, who at that time had been with Shambhala for over two decades, brought me there for lunch one day. While abstaining from Bukowski's preferred tippie (the infamous "publishers' lunch" has changed to a more abstentious affair in recent decades), I did recall the oft-repeated quote of his: "Much publishing is done through politics, friends, and natural stupidity."¹

This quote does in fact capture some truth, especially the role of friends. And if stupidity is a synonym for a willingness to gamble, that holds as well. But other elements are missing from this description, at least in my experience at Shambhala Publications. The zeal, passion, sense of responsibility, love of the material, and even adventure are missing. These elements are endemic in publishing in the area of Buddhism.

There are scores of Christian book publishers, and dozens of Jewish ones in the English language alone. Yet considering the vast body of Buddhist literature from across traditions, canonical and otherwise, the number of publishers with a strong or dedicated Buddhist list inclusive of more serious treatments and translations is tiny. So, the role of the Buddhist publishers is particularly important.

Some History

Shambhala Publications grew out of a little California bookstore, Shambala (the second "h" came later) Booksellers, which was founded by Sam Berholz and Michael Fagan in the late 1960s.

1. Charles Bukowski, *On Writing* (New York: Ecco, 2016), 158.

Shambhala Booksellers started in a little corner within Moe's Books on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, and then moved into its own space next door.

In the shadow and roar of the 1960s counterculture erupting outside, the bookstore was a politics-free gathering place for people to explore the books that Bercholz and Fagan were bringing in from all over the world: classics of spiritual literature both Western and—especially—Eastern.

In 1969 under the tutelage of British Gurdjieffian publisher Vincent Stuart, Bercholz published the US edition of the first book by a then unknown author: *Meditation in Action* by Chögyam Trungpa. The story goes that when Trungpa Rinpoché saw the edition and its Shambhala imprint, he opened and closed his eyes repeatedly in disbelief.

A brief clarification may be in order. Though Bercholz went on to study with Trungpa Rinpoché, among others, Shambhala Publications has never been part of the organization that evolved from Trungpa Rinpoché's community into its various incarnations, including "Shambhala International," its constellation of Shambhala Centers, and *Shambhala Sun* (now *Lion's Roar* and independently operated). Although we have published authors from that community and have in the past 55 years had a few team members from there, we are an entirely distinct entity. The Shambhala Music Festival and various hotels that took on the name are also unrelated to us.

Shambhala Publications, to this day family-owned by Bercholz and his son and daughter, moved to Boulder in 1976, then to Boston in 1984, and back to Boulder in 2015. Apparently, cities beginning with a "B" make a good home. We made the last move to Colorado because we wanted to be in a community where we were really engaged—and with so many authors, practice communities of Buddhism and other traditions and disciplines here, as well as the University of Colorado and Naropa University, it has made for an enriching and symbiotic homebase. As a barometer of the people here, the Boulder Bookstore is always in the top one or two independent bookstore accounts for sales of our books in the United States.

Publishing Buddhism

This article will focus on our program of books on the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism of the Himalayas, including Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal, which I will gloss as Tibetan Buddhism throughout. But first a bit of context: our total list is over 2,200 titles in print across a fairly broad set of subjects. We describe on our website our overall mission: "to publish books—rooted in wisdom traditions—that focus on inner transformation, enlightened living, alleviating the suffering of samsara, and countering spiritual materialism."

So, Buddhism has always been the core of our program. Buddhist titles number about 1,200 and index heavily toward the Tibetan tradition, making us the largest Buddhist book publisher in the world, I believe, in any language. This was helped by the influx of more than 200 Tibetan

Buddhist titles when Sidney Piburn and Jeff Cox brought Snow Lion into the Shambhala Publications fold in 2012. However, our list of books from East Asian and Southeast Asian traditions, and works related to these, continues to grow.

Given our mission, our focus has always been toward works that help preserve traditions and support the people engaged in, or at least interested in, actual practice and study. In-process examples of the first include Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye's *Treasury of Precious Instructions* (*gdams ngag rin po che'i mdzod*) and Chöying Tobden Dorje's *The Complete Nyingma Tradition* (*mdo rgyud mdzod*), which make available key texts and teachings from various traditions.

An example of the second is Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (*byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa*). We have three separate translations as well as a dozen commentaries on the work, including overviews and book-length treatments of chapters from revered masters of Tibet and contemporary Western teachers. These have sold hundreds of thousands of copies collectively.

A second example is on the topic of *lojong* (*blo sbyong*), or mind training. We have more than two dozen titles from Atisha to contemporary American teachers—even Zen teacher Norman Fischer's adaptation of the teachings for Zen students. Pema Chödrön's *lojong* book *Start Where You Are* alone has sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Publishing accessible practical works is an important way to invite people in and allow them to advance their knowledge on a variety of subjects. In addition to these, making the classic texts of the tradition available and having pathways for deep study is essential.

To that end, we have hundreds of works that are or include translations of classical texts (many translated by scholars) and scores of works by Western academics; some of our earliest Tibetan Buddhist books were by Herbert Guenther. Some of the most interesting works in this area to me are books like Cyrus Stearn's *King of the Empty Plain* on Tangtong Gyalpo, our volumes in the Lives of the Masters series, and works by scholars like Karl Brunnhölzl. But we have eschewed the route of a peer review process as there are already excellent options—university presses and others—for authors whose works are best suited for that model.

Of course, works from academia are often of great interest to those practicing—and we have published scores—and many people on staff are avid readers of scholarly works. Also, many of our staff have PhDs and master's degrees but chose publishing over academia for a variety of reasons. So, we have a fluency with that approach, but it is adjacent to our publishing program, not a core part of it, by design. Conversely, we have had team members who later ended up in academia or moved back and forth: Steven Goodman, Jimmy Yu (Guo Gu), and Kathleen Gregory come to mind.

The effect of our publishing program goes far beyond the English language readership. We maintain a global network of agents and partner publishers and attend the major book fairs like Frankfurt, London, and others. In the last 18 months alone, we have licensed 84 Tibetan Buddhist works in 21 different languages to partner publishers around the world. Some publishers choose

to translate our translations, a compound act of *traduttore, traditore* perhaps, but often the only viable means to make a work available in a language where translators of Tibetan are few. We have permitted the publication of a couple of Tibetan Buddhist works originally written in English into Tibetan. And this year saw our first agreement in Arabic for a Tibetan Buddhist book. For some books, there is a wider readership among editions translated from our version than our own: the ripple effect is strong.

Licensing translation rights can be an interesting lens to see the interest in Buddhism across the world. We have seen a big spike in Vietnamese licensing of Tibetan Buddhist books. Japanese publishers are particularly keen on work on Theravada and its derivatives. And while censorship in mainland China has essentially blocked licensing Tibetan Buddhist books for the time being, publishing these kinds of works in Complex Chinese for the Taiwanese market is thriving.

In a great example of bringing coals to Newcastle, we have been publishing more and more South Asian editions where we print English-language books in India, pricing the books for that market (including Bhutan and Nepal) and putting them in reach of local buyers at an affordable price. Many Bhutanese now prefer to read Buddhist works in English. While not particularly profitable, we see it as essential to do our best to make these works available in the lands from which they sprang.

Exploring the Shambhala Catalog

There are three factors to make a book successfully land in a reader's hand: discoverability (will they hear about it), availability (can they access it in a format they want), and conversion (does it interest them enough to buy it).

For us, global distribution through Penguin Random House's supply chain and the ubiquity of online sellers means that the first two of these are more or less solved, though small publishers will struggle in markets outside their own. But discoverability, that elusive holy grail for publishers that is essential to put it in their hands, will always remain a challenge for everyone with up to three million books publishing (mostly self-publishing) every year.²

We try to highlight our Tibetan literature through a variety of means—traditional and experimental. As an example of the latter, we just released an interactive timeline highlighting key figures, works, events, videos, and reader guides from our Tibetan list.³ It is a work in progress and while not meant to replace authoritative sources like Treasury of Lives (<https://treasuryoflives>).

2. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/91574-self-publishing-is-thriving-according-to-bowker-report.html>

3. <https://www.shambhala.com/buddhism-timeline/>

org/), it is a valuable tool for people to explore our catalog. Website visitors can also explore our books via Buddhist-specific topics.⁴

This brings us to the contents of our list within the scope of Tibetan literature. I will highlight some examples, employing the typology Cabezon and Jackson put forth in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Snow Lion, 1996).

History and Biography

For historical chronicles (*rgyal rabs*), a good example is Sakyapa Sonam Gyaltzen's *The Clear Mirror: A Traditional Account of Tibet's Golden Age* (*rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*), which covers the origins of the universe, the Tibetan people, and goes through the imperial period. A good example of a dharma history (*chos 'byung*) is Buton's *History of Buddhism in India and Its Spread to Tibet: A Treasury of Priceless Scripture* (*bu ston chos byung*). Traditional biographies (*rnam thar*) are not in short supply, and examples include accounts of the lives of Vairochana, Tertön Mingyur Dorje, Mipham Rinpoche, two on Yeshe Tsogyal, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, and the *History of the Karmapas*, just to name a few.

Autobiographies and memoirs include Jamgon Kongtrul's *Autobiography*, Khenpo Ngawang Palzang's *Wondrous Dance of Illusion*, Jamyang Sakyapa's *Princess in the Land of Snows*, Namgyal Lhamo Taklha's *Born in Lhasa*, Chögyam Trungpa's *Born in Tibet*, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's *Brilliant Moon*, and Lobsang Gyatso's *Memoirs of a Tibetan Lama*.

Other biographies that do not quite fall into these categories include Cyrus Stearns's *King of the Empty Plain* on Tangtong Gyalpo and his *Buddha from Dölpo*; Sarah Harding's *The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa*; Tulku Thondup's *Masters of Meditation and Miracles*; Alex Gardener's *The Life of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great*; and Elmar R. Gruber's *From the Heart of Tibet* on Drikung Chetsang Rinpoche. We also have creative approaches like Elizabeth Monson's *Tales of a Mad Yogi* on Drukpa Kunley.

Our Lives of the Masters series also plays an important role filling a lacuna in telling the stories and great accomplishments of important Buddhist figures. The goal with these volumes is to go beyond just presenting them as figures behind a great work. Rather, with these volumes we want to show the many facets of each figure's creative and intellectual life. They cover major writings (including some translations), events, and the legacy of each of them. So far, we have Tsongkhapa, Saraha, the second and third Karmapas, Atisa, Maitripa, Gendun Chopel, as well as figures like Xuanzang, Dogen, and Goenka.

Holly Gayley's *Inseparable across Lifetimes: Lives and Love Letters of the Tibetan Visionaries Namtrul Rinpoche and Khandro Täre Lhamo* is a fine example of a work of letters.

Works on guru lineages (*bla ma'i rgyud*) include *A Garland of Immortal Wish-fulfilling Trees: The*

4. <https://www.shambhala.com/buddhist-topics/>

Palyul Tradition of the Nyingmapas and a more recent account of the Dudjom lineage—recently explored by Holly Gayley in this journal’s pages—by Thinley Norbu Rinpoché, *Ruby Rosary*.

Canonical (and Quasi-Canonical) Texts

It may seem rather strange that the publisher with the largest collection of Buddhist books has relatively few complete works from the Kangyur. As John Canti discusses in the previous issue of this journal, the material in the Kangyur has, up to the present, had a role in the living tradition as his teacher Kangyur Rinpoché’s immersion into the canon is proof. But the reality in the English-speaking world is that the texts contained in it are rarely taught or emphasized in Tibetan Buddhist practice communities. This may change with the availability of these works from 84000, but it remains to be seen.

That being said, we do publish the largest Mahayana sutra of the Kangyur: *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (*mdo phal po che*), translated by Thomas Cleary (from the Chinese, which does differ somewhat from the Tibetan and Sanskrit). This text contains the Sutra of the Ten Bhumis (*phags pa sa bcu pa’i mdo*) and the Gandavyuha Sutra (*mdo sdong po bkod pa*), which culminates in Samantabhadra’s Aspiration to Good Actions, or the King of Aspiration Prayers (*bzang spyod smon lam*). And we have various commentarial works on the sutras (though more based on the Pali canon).

While we do not have many full translations of texts in the tantra section of the Kangyur, we have many ancillary works about them. For example, the Kalachakra tantra features in about twenty works, from scholarly treatments like *As Long as Space Endures* to a more traditional overview in *The Realm of Shambhala* and *Introduction to the Kalachakra Initiation*.⁵

An example from the Nyingma Gyübum (*rnying ma rgyud ’bum*) is *The Guhyagarbha Tantra* (*gsang ba’i snying po de kho na nyid nges pa*).

From the Tengyur, a few examples include Nagarjuna’s *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* (*bu ma rtsa ba shes rab*), *Nagarjuna’s Seventy Stanzas* (*stong nyid bdun bcu pa*), a host of translations and commentaries of the five Maitreya texts (*byams chos sde lnga*),⁶ and *Aryadeva’s Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* (*bzhi brgya pa*).

And there is no shortage of treasure (*gter ma*) texts here either. A recent example is Khangsar Tenpa’i Wangchuk’s *The Natural Openness and Freedom of the Mind*, a commentary of recent tertön Deshek Lingpa’s “treasure tantra.” Another is Sera Khandro’s *Refining Our Perception of Reality* on Dudjom Lingpa’s account of his visionary journey. We also have many works based on terma texts; for example, Jigme Lingpa’s many works,⁷ and as an example from the Bön tradition, a profile of Bönpo Treasure-Revealer Shense Lhaje, *Visionary Encounters*.

5. <https://www.shambhala.com/kalachakra-tantra-readers-guide/>

6. <https://www.shambhala.com/topic/five-maitreya-texts/>

7. <https://www.shambhala.com/jigme-lingpa-a-guide-to-his-works/>

Philosophical Literature

We have a long list of philosophical works. Here are a few examples across traditions and time periods that fall outside the Kangyur and Tengyur: Donatella Rossi's *The Philosophical View of the Great Perfection in the Tibetan Bon Religion*; Mipham's *The Wisdom Chapter*; Mipham and Khenpo Shenga's commentaries on the Maitreya/Asanga texts; Karl Brunnhölzl's *Gone Beyond* volumes and *Groundless Paths* on the Prajnaparamita texts, with a focus on the *Abhisamayalamkara*; Rongzompa's *Establishing Appearances as Divine*; Mabja Jangchub Tsondru's *Ornament of Reason*; Donald Lopez's *A Study of Svatantrika*; and Daniel Perdue's *A Course in Buddhist Reasoning and Debate*.

Literature on the Paths

For *lamrim*, we have translations of Tsongkhapa's *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path (lam rim chen mo)* in three volumes, as well as its antecedent, Atisha's *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment (byang chub lam sgron)*. And we have Jigme Lingpa's two-volume (with Kangyur Rinpoché's commentary) *Treasury of Precious Qualities (yon tan mdzod)*. An example of the *tenrim* genre is Gampopa's *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*.

On *lojong*, we have about twenty titles. We have a reading guide to these works available to help navigate so many books, which includes Pema Chödrön's *Start Where You Are*—likely the most widely read book on mind training in the English language.⁸

As an example of the precept and instruction genre across the Buddhist traditions of Tibet is Kongtrul's *Treasury of Precious Instructions (gdams ngag mdzod)*.⁹ Of the eighteen volumes, ten are complete with the remainder on the way, presenting important texts from the Nyingma, Kadam, Sakya, Marpa Kagyu, Shangpa Kagyu, Zhije, Chod, and Jonang traditions.

We also have an abundance of titles containing practice-specific teachings. There are two dozen works related to the preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*).¹⁰ There are about 150 titles specific to Dzogchen and Mahamudra from across a variety of lineages: Shangpa, Gelug, and Kagyu. These tend to be books where the reader will benefit from the guidance of a teacher while studying them. We also have several works specific to the Sakya tradition's practices such as Lama Dampa Sonam Gyaltzen's *Treasury of Esoteric Instructions*.

Ritual

Examples of books on ritual include Gyatrul Rinpoché's *The Generation Stage in Buddhist Tantra*

8. <https://www.shambhala.com/lojong-mind-training/>

9. <https://www.shambhala.com/treasury-of-precious-instructions/>

10. <https://www.shambhala.com/topic/ngondro/>

and Wangchen Rinpoché's book on Nyungné, *Buddhist Fasting Practice*, as well as many on death and dying practices and rituals.¹¹

Literary Arts

For the epic genre (*sgrung*), we have fourteen works where Gesar features, from two large volumes from the multivolume work compiled by Mipham Rinpoché and a book devoted to the tantric practices based on Gesar, to Chögyam Trungpa's exploration and Alexandra David-Néel's treatment.¹² For folk songs and tales, there is the collection *Tibetan Folk Tales* gathered by Audrey and Frederick Hyde-Chambers, and *The Prince and the Zombie* based on the *vetālapañcaviṃśati*, India's and Tibet's early iteration of a *Walking Dead*-friendly-esque frame story. Examples of poetry from the Tibetan tradition include two translations of *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, Thubten Jinpa's *Songs of Spiritual Experience*, and more than one hundred songs from the Kagyu tradition included in *The Rain of Wisdom*.

Non-literary Arts and Sciences

Our only dedicated book on Tibet's legal system is Rebecca French's *The Golden Yoke: The Legal Cosmology of Buddhist Tibet*.

A traditional overview in the fourth volume of the *Treasury of Knowledge* (Book Six, Parts One and Two) explores the subjects of phonology and Sanskrit grammar, logic, fine art, and medicine, along with astrology, poetics, prosody, synonymics, and dramaturgy. There are also subject specific treatments like Philippe Cornu's *Tibetan Astrology* and Dr. Yeshe Dhonden's *Healing from the Source and Health through Balance* on Tibetan medicine.

For works on painting, sculpture, and architecture, some excellent examples include David Jackson's *Tibetan Thangka Painting* and Konchog Lhadrepa and Charlotte Davis's *The Art of Awakening*. A final example of works on the arts is Robert Beer's *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, which is used in monasteries throughout Asia, and whose images grace the bodies of many exiting tattoo shops around the world.

Guidebooks and Reference Works

For itineraries (*lam yig*), one example is Dzongsar Khyentse's modern-day pilgrimage guide to the sacred site of the Buddha, *Best Foot Forward*. For reference works, we offer eight Tibetan language books for learning classical and colloquial Tibetan.¹³

The examples above are just that. There are many more books in all these categories to explore.

11. <https://www.shambhala.com/topic/death-dying/>

12. <https://www.shambhala.com/topic/gesar/>

13. <https://www.shambhala.com/buddhism/tibetan-language/>

A Publication Spotlight

I wanted to highlight a work that is a good example of a single author writing a work that spans multiple genres across this typology.

The *Treasury of Precious Sūtras and Tantras* (*mdo rgyud mdzod*), which we have titled *The Complete Nyingma Tradition*, is one such work in the Shambhala catalog. It covers: cosmology; history, from the spread of Bön and the royal dynastic period through the spread of Sarma lineages; the canonical works from the Kangur, Tengyur, and Nyingma Gyübum; philosophical topics from mundane (non-Buddhist) approaches to the causal and fruitional vehicles exploring phenomenology; logic, grammar, medicine, astrology, poetics, prosody, and drama, and a large portion of the material consists of treatises on tantric and Dzogchen practice. In short, it covers a vast array of topics whose knowledge is essential to progress on the path. And it is characterized by intertextuality, borrowing heavily from Longchenpa, among others.

The author was Choying Tobden Dorje, a *ngakpa* from Rebkong who was born in 1787. He soon joined a local practice community and after some time spent five years at the Geluk Rabgya Monastery in Golok, where the walls between sects were far more porous than in central Tibet. He then went to Dzogchen monastery in Dzachuka before landing in his true spiritual home at the encampment of Dodrubchen Jigmé Thinley Öser under whom he trained for several years. He returned to Rebkong, where from 1836 to 1838 he wrote the entire text. His followers were renowned as the “nineteen hundred lineage bearers of the *phurba*.”

The *Complete Nyingma Tradition* is the largest work on a single tradition available in English. It was published in nine volumes in Tibet and the work includes twenty-five “books” with 101 chapters and 2,179 headings. There were two illustrated volumes as well, one on exoteric topics—a copy of which is at the Guimet in Paris—and an esoteric text containing only illustrations that may no longer be extant.

The text is structured to support deep study. As memorization guides, it comes prepackaged with a concise summary, an outline, the accompanying *Golden Key* subject index, and the headings reproduced in short verses meant to be memorized. Alas, a text that explained how to teach the text was lost.

A new Tibetan edition is in the works. And we are moving along with the English translation: five volumes in English are complete with another one releasing in 2026, with a few more to follow.

So, the Tibetans will have it, and it will be available here; but for Buddhist publishers to thrive and be able to do even more, we need readers for works like these.

Challenges

The economics of publishing, always formidable, have in 2024 been under pressure from a new set of factors.

Printing costs for new books and reprints since COVID have soared, doubling and even tripling. There are multiple reasons for this, but the repurposing of pulp and mills to cardboard to support Amazon's packaging needs is one such novel factor. Tying up working capital in inventory has a rippling effect throughout a business.

For example, a recent 850-page hardcover we published aimed at a fairly niche readership for whom it is extremely important costs nearly \$10 per copy to print. How to make this available to readers at an accessible price while still making it break even and contribute to our operating costs is extremely challenging. When we need to reprint, likely at a much lower quantity, the per unit printing cost could be double that. Some academic publishers might price it at more than \$100, knowing they will make money from sales to libraries. Our goal is to open readers' minds so pricing books at a level of affordability remains a priority but also a balancing act.

Thanks to our backlist from 55 years of publishing, we have ballast to support our frontlist publishing program and we are therefore very stable. But for an aspiring would-be Buddhist publisher, the financial barriers are daunting, now more than ever.

We, like many trade publishers, have a high-touch editorial process, with developmental editors, assistant editors, editorial assistants, proofers, indexers, copyeditors, and more, all overseen by a managing editorial team. When adding in production and design, the marketing and publicity teams, and contracts and rights teams, as many as two dozen people might be involved in every book.

Funding a dynamic marketing team has emerged as essential. While Amazon has for the most part solved the availability issue with books, their facilitation of discovery has become more challenging. Fewer bookstores and smaller Buddhist sections means only a tiny fraction of books published are on physical shelves. And while our forthcoming books are sold into accounts worldwide by a large team of Penguin Random House representatives fluent in the content of our books, there is still a lot of effort in making our audience aware of what we are bringing out. So, a trade publisher like us has to allocate a significant budget for each title so it is seen on social media, received in hundreds of thousands of email inboxes, and appears in Amazon searches. The fact that publishers need to spend an increasing amount of their marketing budget on Amazon advertising, so their books show up in searches is an additional cost.

Another dampener on demand for Buddhist books is piracy. I imagine many readers of this article know people who have vast collections of pdfs on their laptops, where an immense catalog of titles often sits. Claims that they would never have purchased them if they had to pay are hard

to sympathize with. We produced something at great cost and for it to be copied and distributed without compensation is a source of frustration, and we have no illusions that there is anything we can do about it. Legal protections, guilt trips, precepts, and technology all fail to prevent or change this.

Practitioner communities can witness even more flagrant piracy. While in places like Southeast Asia where the culture, mass lay support, and institutions facilitate the production and dissemination of texts for free, in most other places the marketplace is how books are funded, produced, discovered, and disseminated. The notion that “dharma should be free” in the context of producing a book that will end up in thousands of hands rubs against practical realities.

I recently participated in a program based on a translation we publish. Before the monthslong course started, the well-intentioned administrator organizing things sent out a scan of the book to all participants, including me. While they did receive an earful, requested recipients to delete the scan, and apologized, the number of participants ended up far in excess of the books sold.

There is a price for piracy and its cannibalization of legitimate purchases of the book beyond depriving authors and publishers of recompense for their work. As time goes on, some books that should be published simply will not be because piracy has eroded their viability.

While self-publishing is an option—and often a good one in some cases—the reality is books done this way generally miss out on a rigorous editorial process, an appealing and readable interior design, an elegant cover, distribution across the world (our books are sold directly in over 150 countries by Penguin Random House), marketing to make it known to its audience, and plenty more that publishers do, which all add up.

For us, the costs to produce a book can be as low as \$10,000 but more often than not reach several tens of thousands of dollars. Costs can include: an advance on royalties paid to the author or translator that may never earn out, designing and typesetting the interior, licensing art for the cover, the design of the cover, copyediting, proofing, the cost of the paper, cost and printing of endsheets if included, printing the interior, printing the cover, binding, freight from the printer, freight shipping to bookstores, storage in a warehouse, the percentage on sales we pay for distribution, costs converting it to various e-book formats, the high costs to produce an audio edition of a portion of our books, digital advertising, print advertising, publicity, and “coop:” paying to have books displayed in bookstores. For a large online retailer, we have to pay a percentage of sales for them to even show and recommend the books, and that is outside of the advertising we also do with them. All this does not even count the salaries of in-house staff and operations or platforms like our website and marketing/email services. We then deeply discount the books to wholesalers and resellers. Once the advance is earned, we continue to pay royalties for the life of the book.

When a project is not expected to break even, we either have to pass on it or, if we can, find a sponsor. It is thanks to organizations like the Tsadra Foundation, which has supported dozens of works including some of our multivolume series like Kongtrul’s *Treasury of Knowledge* and

Choying Tobden Dorje's *The Complete Nyingma Tradition*, that some of these books can be made available. And Tsadra and other organizations have also supported the translators behind scores of translations. Without them, there would be fewer of many important resources available.

For books in color, it is even more challenging, and printing in China—always the lowest cost—now faces increased censorship; most Tibetan-centric projects cannot be printed there. This also applies to certain black and white books when their formats are easiest or only possible in China but can no longer be produced there. It used to be the case that if “Dalai Lama” appeared four times or less the book could be printed. Now, even a single mention of his name in a book that is not even about Tibetan Buddhism usually means printers there are compelled to refuse it as we recently experienced.

But there is another trend that makes publishing works on Tibetan and other Buddhist traditions increasingly difficult. The fact is that interest in these subjects has waned.

There are a host of factors at play. In the age of the smartphone and social media, attention spans have shortened, the attraction of the “other” or exotic has lost its strength, and the introspective and questioning instinct has been smothered in a barrage of information and distraction. This is also reflected in academia where the flight from the humanities to STEM subjects has sapped students and funding. Various scandals have not helped.

Many of us came of age with the notion, expressed by Arnold Toynbee, Einstein, and countless political, cultural, and intellectual leaders and influencers since, that Buddhism was in the ascendant. But that is not the age we live in now.

In Europe and the Americas, we see—in addition to the erosion of possibilities in academia—signs all around us: the Rubin Museum closing its doors; *Buddhadharma* magazine printing its last issue in 2024; Naropa University selling its main campus; dharma centers, with some exceptions, being mostly attended by older generations. The causes of all this are many and arguable. But the overall effect is not.

Google Trends shows how the worldwide search popularity for “Tibetan Buddhism” is now down 88% from a peak in 2004 (when they started collecting this data).¹⁴ Results are similar for related terms like “Rinpoché.”¹⁵

Book sales across all channels reflect this too. There are contrasting trends. We are certainly in a golden age of Buddhist publishing in Western languages. An incredible number of books are being published by the likes of us, Wisdom Publications, Rangjung Yeshe, and a few other publishers, as well as university presses. Projects like 84000, Lotsawa House, Khyentse Vision, and many others are incredible resources for practitioners and scholars.

Yet at the same time, interest is waning. The best, if imperfect, measure of overall book sales

14. <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=%22tibetan%20buddhism%22&hl=en>

15. <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=%22Rinpoché%22&hl=en>

in the United States is Circana Bookscan, which tracks actual point of sale purchases of books, capturing many of the main vendors. From 2014 through 2023 there was a 20% decline in sales of books with the Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) code for Tibetan Buddhism across all publishers (we did not experience this sharp fall in this part of our list, but I know several others who did). Other Buddhist BISAC codes indicating more serious works—History as well as “Rituals and Practice”—saw declines of 40% in the same period. It is an undeniable reality that book sales of the traditional or more serious Buddhist books are down. Anecdotally, for a book that in the past we might expect sales of 5,000 copies in the first two years, we would now be lucky to sell half or a third of that.

In Asia it is not so different and while figures of books sales beyond our list are not easy to find, broader markers are available. For example, while there has been an increase of interest in Tibetan Buddhism among adherents throughout China, how this is measured and how significant this is proves hard to quantify. However, there has been a severe crackdown on Tibetan culture and religion, from academic work no longer permitted in the Tibetan language, and the suppression of Tibetan language and culture,¹⁶ to a constriction of freedom at religious institutions.¹⁷

A recent Pew survey found that 14% of South Korean and Japanese adults report that they were brought up as Buddhists but no longer identify with any religion.¹⁸ 12% of South Koreans and 9% of people in Hong Kong who currently identify as Christian were raised in a different religious tradition, such as Buddhism. Only 16% of Japanese adults say they believe in karma.

Looking Ahead

Marketing guru Seth Godin has said, “The future of publishing is about having connections to readers and the knowledge of what those readers want.”¹⁹ Having a direct connection to readers is essential and that is why we have worked hard to establish a list of hundreds of thousands of emails. And publishing works that speak to the challenges of emerging generations which they can relate to in their language and outlook is important. But for a mission-driven publisher, following trends is not always an appealing prospect and can in fact be antithetical to our purpose.

For a long time, Buddhism was niche in the English-speaking world, then it gained a significant measure of mainstream appeal in the 1990s, with even the Big Five publishers (Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster) jumping in. But as

16. <https://www.economist.com/china/2024/06/13/why-china-takes-young-tibetans-from-their-families>

17. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/chinas-hidden-crackdown-in-tibet/>

18. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/06/17/religion-and-spirituality-in-east-asian-societies>

19. Trachtenberg, Jeffrey. 2011 “Author, Amazon.com Elbow Aside Middleman” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2011. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703618304576116402685068900>

interest recedes for the time being, it is up to publishers like Shambhala Publications, Wisdom Publications, the university presses that publish work on Buddhism well, Rangjung Yeshe, and a handful of others to remain stalwart and committed to what we do. We are not passive reflectors of what is happening in the culture but can in fact drive and influence the conversation and create, in a sense, the market as we have done in the past. I believe our culture will exhaust itself in the attention-sucking technology, materialism, and political vicissitudes it is indulging in at present. And we and our books will still be there for readers.

Our Aspirations

In the meantime, we remain committed to publishing works from the Tibetan tradition and there is so much more to do from publishing translations to encouraging new and creative directions in what we publish. For translations, while many of the greatest hits are available, in many ways we have just scratched the surface. There are a lot of aspiring and working translators, as those behind our books and projects like 84000 prove. And while I cast a bit of gloom above over waning interest, I believe this will be seen twenty years from now as a dip in a cycle, a bardo that we had to wait out a bit. We are publishing for the future as much as the present, and there will be a time when our culture turns back to it with ever more enthusiasm.

But to hurry this process along, publishers, writers, scholars, artists, thinkers, and creatives of all kinds need to tell good stories. We would all love a modern-day Buddhist-inspired epic that grips the imagination like Harry Potter books, or Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Or a visionary wordsmith like Seamus Heaney or Maya Angelou, perhaps, from the Tibetan diaspora, or anyone who had trained as a yogi in the Tibetan tradition. Or a nature writer of the caliber of Robert Macfarlane or Kathleen Jaimie whose insights on the natural world and our place in it were informed by Shabkar. Dare I suggest a Romantasy set in Tibet? Those are all books I would want to read.