chapter 7

Conservation

It is widely known that the political situation in the twentieth century not only led to the displacement of a large number of Tibetan books among other cultural heritage objects and sites but also that this displacement had a major impact on their conservation status. The presence today of so many Tibetan books in Western collections is not a result of their having been willingly sold or discarded by the previous Tibetan owners; rather, it is directly attributable to the relatively recent Chinese invasion of Tibet, the subsequent destruction of a large percentage of its monasteries, and the death or uprooting of many practicing Tibetan Buddhists. The purposeful laying waste of Tibetan monasteries and devastation of centuries-old collections of books and manuscripts had far-reaching consequences. The fate of the lost books and other textual materials was intertwined with that of the people.

In Tibet, the book is an essential tool for Buddhist practice that is sometimes also respected as an object with attributed magical powers. The accumulation of spiritual merit through making or reciting a book composed of precious materials and created through special techniques has always had a meaning for the spiritual life of Tibetans. This fact makes the problems of their conservation very specific. Tibetan beliefs about the sacred nature of books are very strong. Thus, in the opinion of many monks, but also in the view of lay Tibetan Buddhists, the sacred nature of books is defaced if they are restored. For Tibetans, the religious function of a book is prioritized over its educational and archival functions. In my opinion, these feelings should be taken seriously for several reasons. First, Tibetan Buddhism is a living tradition (Figure 117). Moreover, this is not a case in which the present practitioners are far removed in descent from the people who originally made and used the books; there is continuity in the tradition of creating and respecting the books. Therefore, despite mass relocation of books from their places of origin, when Tibetans talk about museum objects, they are talking about a group of objects that were actually used in worship in the monasteries of Tibet. Second, we know from historical and ethnographic sources that books as sacred objects were never discarded in Tibet in the past but remained forever within the monastery walls or in homes. When they became too worn or damaged for ritual use, they were housed in special shrines where they continued to be treated with respect. In special cases, they could be ritually burned.1 Finally, the refugees in India,

1 Snellgrove 1978: 351.
Nepal, and the West have worked very hard to overcome enormous obstacles and maintain their religion and culture outside of Tibet. We would have to be able to point to great advances in knowledge to be gained by desecrating their sacred objects through conservation treatment in order to even begin to justify that practice. With all due respect to such an attitude, it is astonishing that actions which for Western people mean to ‘preserve’ the object, for Tibetans may mean to ‘desecrate’ or even ‘destroy’ in the sense of their functionality. This disparity does not make discussion of ‘conservation of Tibetan books’ easier.

Aspects of conservation are directly related to the materiality and function of a book. However, this sometimes means different things in particular locations and societies. Tibetan books in Western collections are very often objects with no history or even a claim to a particular origin; they are completely displaced objects. Despite this fact, they have recently been given center stage in Western collections to represent the Himalayas and Tibet. While becoming artworks, objects gain a new power that enables them to impact a new environment. After being handled by Tibetan people, they become actors in the social interactions they have generated, and in turn, can be manipulated. I would say that in this sense, Tibetan books in the West are ‘objects in transition.’ They move from one place to another; they pass through different stages and hands, and change their identity and function. In many cases, they will