

“The younger generation ... are the custodians of a very important tradition that can help bring peace to the world, to give happiness to others.”

– Jamyang Dorjee Chakrishar

Story by Anne Pinto-Rodrigues / Contributor
Photos by Melanie Stetson Freeman / Staff photographer

Scrolls, not screens:
Tibetan calligrapher
brings his art
to the next generation

JAMYANG DORJEE CHAKRISHAR

- Has been practicing Tibetan calligraphy since retirement in 2008
- Holds the world record for longest calligraphy scroll
- Visits schools and monasteries in India, Nepal, and Bhutan to teach Tibetan writing and calligraphy

For Jamyang Dorjee Chakrishar, the importance of beautiful handwriting was instilled early on, while he was growing up in the Indian Himalayas in the late 1950s and early 1960s. “When I was in Class 1 till Class 5, we had such wonderful, scholarly teachers,” he recalls. Like Mr. Chakrishar and his family, these educators were born in Tibet but had fled the Chinese occupation there and sought refuge in India’s northeastern Sikkim state.

Mr. Chakrishar went on to work in Sikkim’s tourism department and its ministry of culture, as well as undertaking a decade of volunteer service for the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamshala, India. Upon retiring, he began practicing Tibetan calligraphy. He also creates images by writing Tibetan prayers and scriptures in miniature form with the help of a magnifying glass.

Today, this self-taught artist holds the world record for the longest calligraphy scroll – 165 meters (about 180 yards) – which he created in 2010.

Monitor contributor Anne Pinto-Rodrigues interviewed Mr. Chakrishar, who was visiting his son in upstate New York, via a video call. This transcript has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Q: What inspired you to create the longest calligraphy scroll in the world?

In 2009, I was trying to find out where Tibetan calligraphy stands. In doing my research, I came across a person carrying a certificate in his hand which had one line written in Chinese: “150 meters long, Guinness World Record.” I thought, “Let me break that record, so that [Tibetan calligraphy] will come into the global limelight.” So I started working on that.

I found out that there are 35 to 36 great masters of Tibet, from all schools of Buddhism, who have composed long-life prayers for His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, and all these compositions are compiled into two book volumes. So I said, “Why not write all the long-life prayers in one single [scroll]? It would be very auspicious, and that would be my practice of calligraphy as well. If it’s longer than 150 [meters], then I can beat the record.”

It took me almost six, seven months to complete.

Q: What is the scroll made of?

The paper was a traditional handmade paper that I got from Nepal. My friend Nimto Sherpa has a paper-making factory there. Number one, [the paper] had to be made without chemicals. I also thought it’s very important to use Lokta paper. Lokta is a plant that grows [at altitudes] above 10,000 feet. The plant is never cut; it’s pruned. The more you prune, the more it grows.

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Tibetan calligraphy artist Jamyang Dorjee Chakrishar, who is self-taught, is surrounded by his work inside his studio in his son’s home in Highland, New York.



Most of the lines of Mr. Chakrishar’s art (photo left) are created with miniature calligraphy. His tools (photo above) include ink, brushes, manga pens from Japan (the colored caps denote the size of the pen’s nib), a magnifying glass, and a stamp pad.

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For the ink, there's already a long tradition in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy of using sumi ink, which is very good. So, I used sumi ink and a [fountain] pen. Then I've used four kinds of [calligraphy] styles in there. I brought [the scroll] to New York. It's 52 kilos [about 115 lbs.] heavy.

Q: Tibetan youths, especially in the diaspora, are often disconnected from their roots. How important is it to you to give talks and lectures to young people and to introduce them to Tibetan calligraphy?

Not only talks, but in the monasteries and schools that I visit, I teach writing. I teach them good handwriting in different styles.

I'm in the evening of my life. So, it's very important for me to inform [young people]. With my limited knowledge and resources, I've been able to do it quite a bit these [past] few years.

The younger generation of Tibetans has to be told that they are the custodians of a very important tradition that can help bring peace to the world, to give happiness to others. We have that knowledge. So, I always tell Tibetan youths that they must first of all, understand it. I try to explain to them the importance of the [Tibetan] script, which is the custodian of great knowledge, and then after that, they can practice visual art from that wisdom.

Wherever I go, one of the things I do is to write people's names in calligraphy, with brushstrokes. Everybody becomes excited to see their own name in calligraphy, and they frame it. This has been one way of inspiring them.

Q: How have young people reacted?

When they see their own name in calligraphy, with the brushstrokes – sometimes the brushstrokes overlap, creating beautiful art out of their names – many of them cry. Sometimes, when I go to an exhibition, people are already lining up, and I can't say no to them.

In Bhutan, in two days of my exhibition there, I wrote the names of 1,500 people. I'm very happy that there are at least 1,500 people who have my calligraphy in their living room.

Q: Tibetan calligraphy remains a little-known art form. What gives you hope that it will not die out?

Before 2010, Tibetan calligraphy art was not known at all. But now, there's a new awareness in Tibet, as well as in the Tibetan community in exile. Many calligraphy associations have come up in Tibet because they're giving importance to calligraphy and calligraphy art. Every April 30th, they celebrate Tibetan Calligraphy Day all over Tibet and in some parts of India also. Every year, it's becoming bigger and bigger, with more participation.

Especially now, Tibetans have a fear in their hearts that we might lose our culture and tradition and language. I'm very, very optimistic that Tibetan culture, Tibetan calligraphy, and Tibetan handwriting will slowly come into the limelight.

Last year, I was able to visit some universities here in America – Indiana University, Columbia University, and University of Chicago – where I talked about the evolution of Tibetan script and Tibetan calligraphy art. The Rubin Museum [of Himalayan Art in New York] was kind enough to do a [video] series on me. ■



Mr. Chakrishar (photo above) creates his art with a pen and a magnifying glass, using sumi ink from Japan and handmade paper. The artist (photo below) works on a piece in his studio inside his son's home in upstate New York. He also has a home studio in India.



Mr. Chakrishar uses a brush to spell the photographer's first name.