

# SHAMBHALA SUTRA

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED IN WESTERN TIBET



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**THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED  
IN WESTERN TIBET**

Laurence J. Brahm

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To my second son Long Xiaolin (Robert Brahm),  
who grew up without me, but knowing  
I was in Tibet searching for Shambhala.



The lover from whom I met and passed by chance,  
Is a girl with a perfumed body.  
It is like picking up a turquoise of whitish lustre,  
And throwing it away off-hand.  
If I reciprocate with the feelings of the girl,  
My share in religion during this life will be deprived.  
If I wander among the solitary mountain ranges,  
It would be contradictory to the wishes of the girl.

*The Love Songs*

The Sixth Dalai Lama

Tsangyang Gyatsho (1683-1706)

# CONTENTS

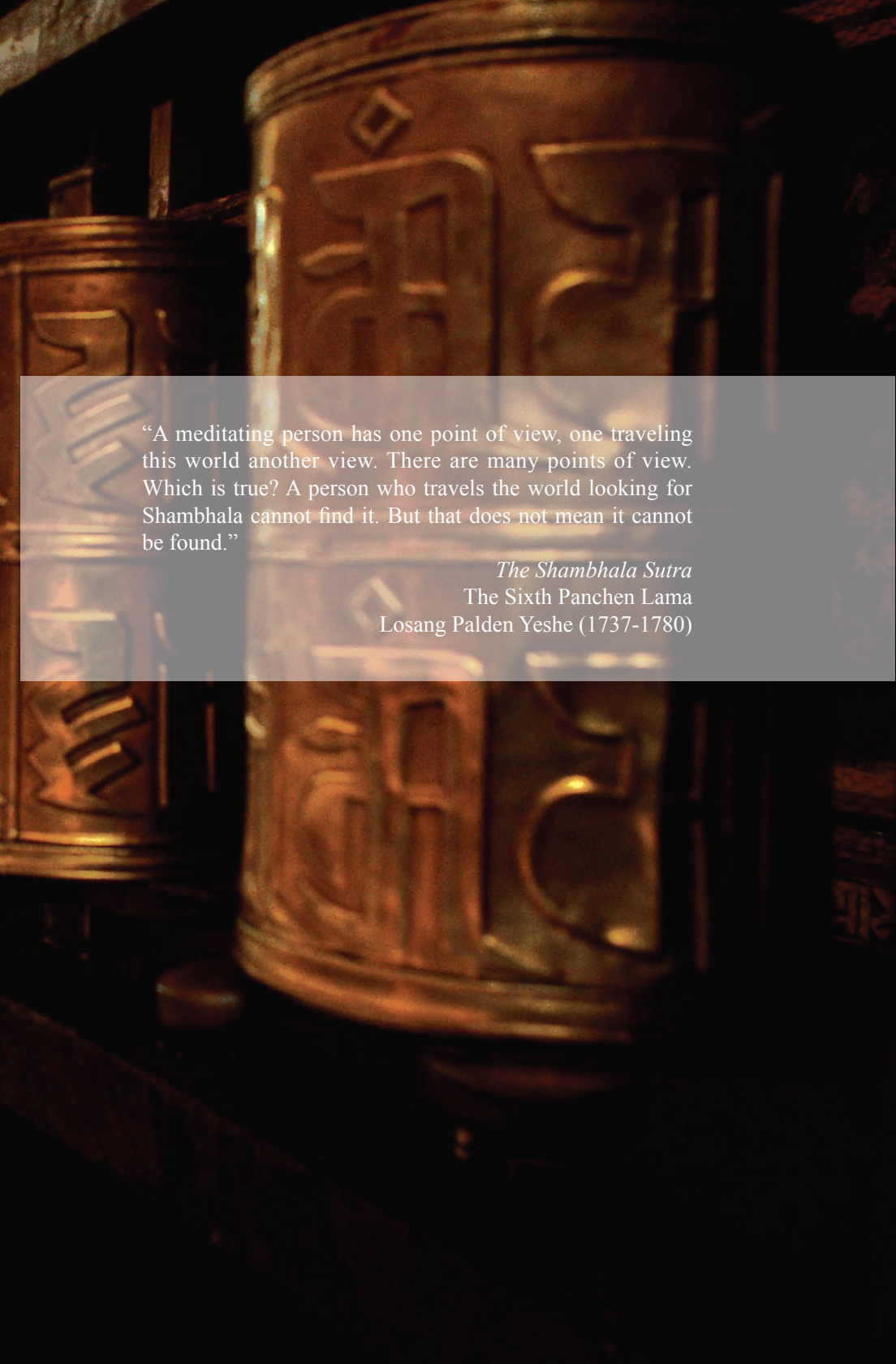
## GOING 003

- The Sutra 008
- The Directions 015
- The Monk 027
- The Buddha 034
- The Oracle 046
- The Bodhisattva 058
- The Road 071

## RETURNING 085

- Ngari 089
- Desert 100
- Lakes and Mountains 110
- A Spirit 117
- The Epic War 126
- Lost Kingdom 145
- Unanswered Questions 157
- Time and Space 164
- Panchen Lama 172
- Our Future 181
- Story End 193





“A meditating person has one point of view, one traveling  
this world another view. There are many points of view.  
Which is true? A person who travels the world looking for  
Shambhala cannot find it. But that does not mean it cannot  
be found.”

*The Shambhala Sutra*  
The Sixth Panchen Lama  
Losang Palden Yeshe (1737-1780)





*Going*





***I had*** been here before. I remembered clearly. I tried to remember, but was just not sure. I tried to remember again.

I was four years old. It was a dream. I ventured into a canyon without time, a canyon spreading into desert, a space without perimeters.

Directions became meaningless. The space stretched into eternity without form. Mountains dominated everywhere. On the horizon, they dissolved dust. There was no sense of direction at all, and no reason to be. Creeping awareness whispered deep within me that there was no way to leave the desert except to cross it. Unable to return on the path entered, I awoke crying.

I was a teenager when the dream occurred again. Entering a dimensionless realm, the canyon reappeared. This time it was narrower and deeper but quickly spread into desert. I could not find my way across the desert. The mountains ahead felt threatening, almost surreal in the power they exuded. To reach the mountains, I suspected, this desert would have to be crossed. I was certain it could not be crossed. If the desert could not be crossed, this place must be an illusion. Concern became fear. It struck like darkness, warning me to leave immediately. This time, I did not cry but quickly backtracked the path I took. Within moments, I was awake in my dark bedroom in Connecticut. A full moon bathed the lawn outside. Autumn leaves scattered.

I was a university student when the dream occurred a third time. The canyon reappeared, floating in mist. There were lush plants growing in cracks of sulfite spitting rocks. It had just rained and dew was quickly bringing life out from dust. Thunder echoed somewhere else. It faded from this place, and was no longer present. Wind blew, creeping across my shirt. Dust scattered, then eroded. Plateaus cracked. They became canyons. Rain froze. It became snow. Wind coughed. Snows blew in six directions. Suddenly, the desert was covered by vast blanketing snows. Stone cliffs stared down white. They too were covered with snows. Soon, it all began to drift.

I knew that passages would be blocked and began to leave quickly. There was only one passage, a thin gravel road, distinct because it was so bare. The place entered was the only way to leave. If I did not leave quickly, I knew it would soon be blocked by snow. Afraid of this place, I left, awakening in a student dorm. Beer cans were strewn all over the campus lawn, bathed in blue autumn moonlight outside my window. They were covered in dew. It was early morning. Breathing deeply, I had awoken.

The last time this dream occurred, I was a lawyer working for a prestigious international law firm in Hong Kong. The excitement of professional life had become a labyrinth of stress. There seemed to be no exit except vacations in Phuket resorts where I ran into the same clients I wanted to escape from. Political infighting between partners in the law firm seemed to dwarf the United Nations. I took airplanes more frequently than public buses. I no longer had time to feed my dog.







After almost daily evening networking cocktail parties, I worked through each night to finish contracts for clients, so I could go to the fitness center and squeeze in a workout before returning to the office where I usually spent the night. I began to miss my workouts and stayed at the computer all night writing documents until I fell asleep at my desk in the early awakening hours. It was on just such a night the dream came back.

This time, canyon erupted like hell. I fell into the desert and landed on a sand dune. The wind blew and sand covered me. I wiped it from my eyes and looked around. The desert expanded in all directions. There were bones of carcasses with dried meat and patches of fur hanging from their rib cages. Black ravens feasted. Skulls of what seemed like large cows were stacked on piles of rocks. The ravens tore meat from the skulls. The sun was a distinct orange. The sky was turquoise blue. And the desert expanded into pools of waters, lakes that could not be crossed because the alkaline was so concentrated they were poison. Beyond the desert were mountains. They could not be crossed either because their passes were blocked, smothered in snow. Beyond the mountains there was another desert. I was not quite sure what was to be found in that other desert beyond the mountains. But this time, before awakening, one thing was certain. I had to go there.







## The Sutra

“If you want to go to Shambhala, there are many dangerous places and demons will disrupt the way and hurt you on the road... Many people will try to be obstacles... If you read the sutra many times, through mental power, you will overcome them.”

*The Shambhala Sutra*

***Tashilumbo*** Monastery is located in Tibet's central-western city of Shigatse. Here, wind blows through long winding corridors of packed stone, leaving cool vacuums of space between the flattening heat of late afternoon. This time of the day in central-western Tibet, one can feel feverish. Golden rays become razor knives slicing laterally across the Himalayan plateau. Their intensity sharpens as the late afternoon sun shifts.

This is the best time of the day to take refuge from the sun. Between the coolness of thick adobe walls, a monk enters a corridor. His robes are touched by wind. He tightens them against the cold. The corridor is dark. It leads into cool space brightened by dark wooden block prints stacked into walls. The wooden blocks are so closely packed into the walls that not even a rat can find its way through the maze created by them.

These wood blocks are used for printing sutras (Tibetan prayer books). Sutras contain more than prayers. They tell stories of the past and future. They can provide meditation instruction. If read carefully between the lines, they drop hints, like where to go next.

Sutras are printed by hand. This is not because the Tibetans do not have digitized offset printing systems, or that multinational software companies have not penetrated the Tibetan plateau —believe me, they are everywhere. When printing sutras, the monks recite prayer blessings and mantra.







This goes beyond the functions of a digitized offset printing system. There are just some things with which advanced technology still cannot yet connect.

Two young novice monks are dusting and re-ordering the block prints. This is a kind of library inventory. There is no internet depository of information here. Only old boxes made of wood and yak skin. But they are very reliable and can weather the hot summers and cold winters. Tucked inside each box is a sutra.

One black yak skin box is removed from a shelf and placed on a table very carefully. An old sutra text — the only one left of its kind — is wrapped and placed back into the box with tender care only given to a baby. There is no other sutra

like this one left in the world. There are no copies, only this original, it is called *The Shambhala Sutra*.

The Sixth Panchen Lama, Losang Palden Yeshe (1737-1780), wrote *The Shambhala Sutra*. Tashilumbo Monastery has always been the seat of the Panchen Lamas. So their main palace is here. The last precious copy of the ancient *Shambhala Sutra* is kept in the palace. Access to it is limited.

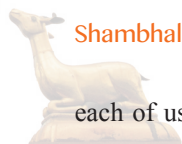
The sutra was written on at least three different levels.

On the first level, it can be understood as a guidebook leading one on a journey to find the mystical kingdom of Shambhala. This kingdom is sometimes referred to in Western literature as “Shangri-La”. So on a first read, it appears that *The Shambhala Sutra* serves as a roadmap, a kind of Tibetan odyssey.

*The Shambhala Sutra* describes places such as “Poison Lake”, “Demon Lake” and “one hundred mountains that emit light after dark” — a natural Himalayas aurora borealis phenomenon. All these places exist in Ngari, Tibet’s most western, remote and inaccessible prefecture. By following *The Shambhala Sutra* as a guidebook, sure enough one can arrive at these places. I found them by making this journey; they all exist. But the question remains — can the sutra lead you to Shambhala?

On a second level, maybe the sutra is not meant to be a literal travel guide at all. Another interpretation is: it could be a meditation roadmap leading each individual on a journey within himself. At this level, the understanding of *The Shambhala Sutra* becomes more complicated. It teaches





each of us how to harness negative energy and convert it into positive. But can we do it?

There is a third-level understanding. *The Shambhala Sutra* serves as an oracle of events yet to come, a kind of Nostradamus prediction. Many might prefer to just dismiss this part. However, maybe we have already arrived upon certain events without realizing it.

The sutra prophesizes the Kali Age, or the era of destruction. It tells of one nation, specifically in the west that adheres to a religious and political ideology of intolerance, it tries to unite the world into a single empire, seeking to impose its values and beliefs on other nations and peoples. Meanwhile, people in its own cities kill one another for greed. Control of resources to support wasteful luxury at the expense of other peoples is an underlying premise of the empire's expansion. Environmental desecration becomes part of the process.

Reaction becomes violent as weaker peoples, whose voices are not heard, use guerilla tactics to fight back. They adopt even unthinkable methods to counter the massive force of religious values and political ideologies being globally imposed upon them. They return to caves and tunnel networks in the mountains, resorting to extreme measures because all other legitimate options have run out. The sutra specifically foresees the rise of "terrorist actions". Some scholarly interpretations indicate the spark unleashing the Kali Age will occur in Central Asia, what is today's Afghanistan.

Negative actions breed negative reactions, which in turn stimulate an irreversible cycle of war and suffering. The Kali

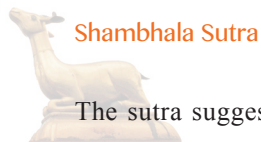
Age of war, terror and disease is driven by an underlying cycle of human ignorance and short-term greed perpetuated through a very advanced economic system based on belief in the overwhelming driving force of materialistic motivation.

The cycle only ends when a new world order arrives. This requires a complete shattering of assumptions underlying the earlier world order. The sutra envisions suppressing negative forces with a positive universal intention to herald a future era of peace, environmental balance and human dignity yet to come. This future is Shambhala.

*The Shambhala Sutra* tells of a road to “a place beyond a place.” This place seems unreachable, but it can be attained.







The sutra suggests how to attain it. Within *The Shambhala Sutra*, prophecies written in the past become relevant to the future. So because *The Shambhala Sutra* is a kind of oracle, it is invaluable.

*The Shambhala Sutra* is not available on the internet, so do not bother trying to find it there. There is only one hard copy left. It is kept in the sutra library in Tashilumbo Monastery. Here, it is very safe.

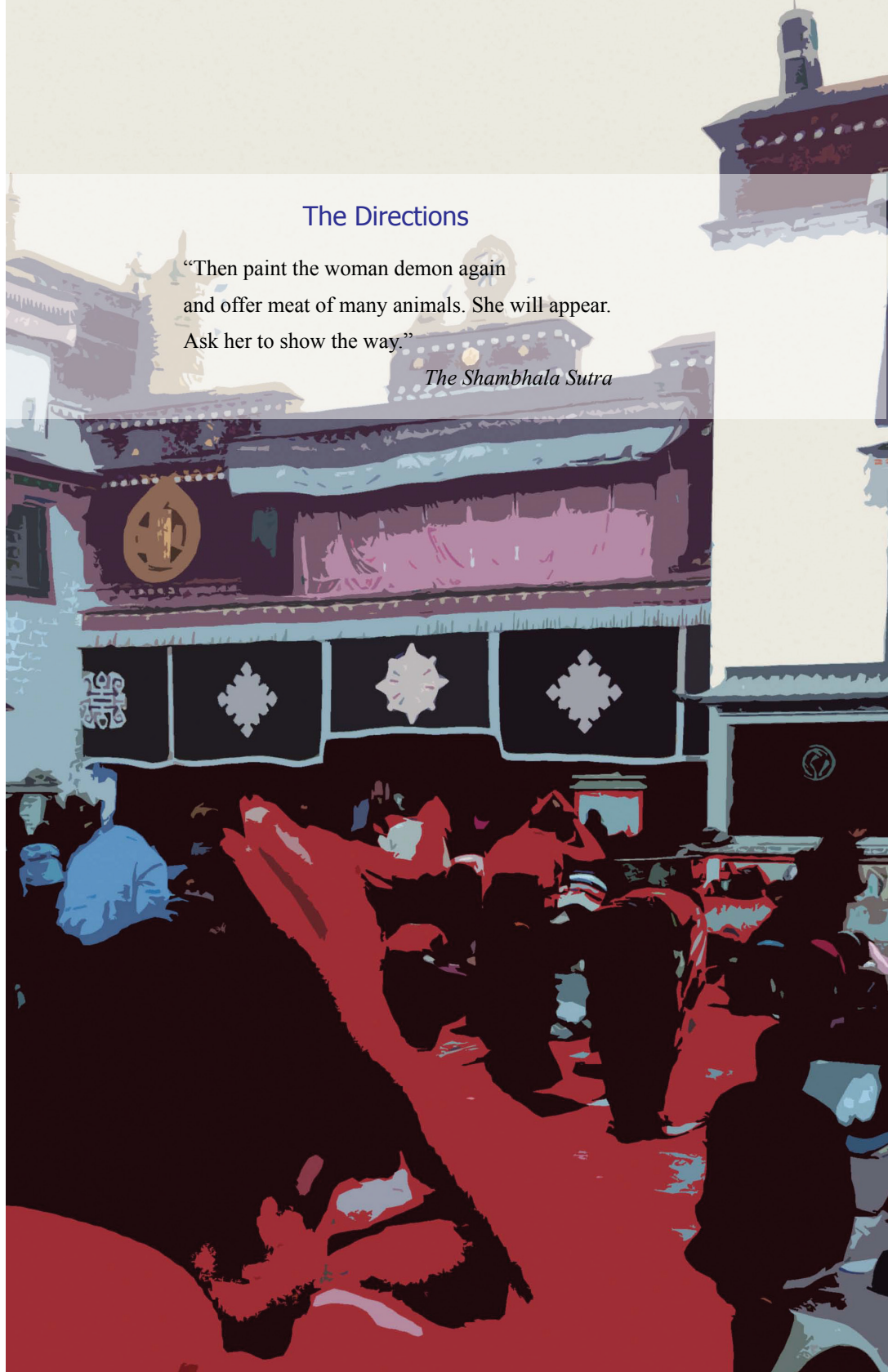
A monk caringly wraps the ancient sutra in an orange cloth and tucks it back into an old oiled black yak skin box, which is then carefully placed on a wooden table soaked in blue light from yak butter candles flickering for a moment from movement of his robes as he passes into the next chamber.

Two novices follow the monk. They are very careful in learning and studying his every action. Together, they leave, finding a place down the corridor to rest for a moment and sip Tibetan tea. But when they return, they are shocked. The unforeseen has occurred. The black box is missing.

## The Directions

“Then paint the woman demon again  
and offer meat of many animals. She will appear.  
Ask her to show the way.”

*The Shambhala Sutra*





**Things** start later in Lhasa. Clocks are fixed to Beijing time, but local people continue to follow the sun. It was already 9:30 a.m. but the narrow whitewashed adobe alleyways of Lhasa's old city were just beginning to awake.

For many Tibetans, morning begins by encircling Jokhang Temple or Potala Palace. They turn handheld prayer wheels with a feeling of grace. They remember what they have awoken for.

At 3,600 meters above sea level, breathing becomes acute, a bit more difficult. Having just arrived in Lhasa, everything felt as if it had begun in slow motion. Taking one's time becomes important, which is actually essential. This means using the space around you to think before doing.

I thought about this for a moment, taking a breath. It was the first time I did that. Having arrived the night before, I still felt wheezy from the altitude. Stopping before a stall selling Tibetan fiat bread for breakfast, I asked, "How much is one piece?"

"Five *jiao* (fifty cents)," the shop lady smiled. As I pulled five Chinese ten-cent bills from my pocket, three children rushed up and tugged at my sleeves, hands held out, begging. I handed the fifty cents to the stall lady. Smiling, she leaned over and gave each begging child one ten-cent bill. "Now go, leave the foreigner alone," she laughed, as the kids ran off giggling.

I was stunned. She sold me Tibetan bread for fifty cents,



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THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED IN WESTERN TIBET

In a shop along the busy Barkor Street in Lhasa, writer and filmmaker Laurence J. Brahm stumbles upon an ancient Buddhist sutra, Shambhala Sutra. His purchase of this ancient sutra sets him off on a journey in search of the mythical Shambhala, known to the west as 'Shangri-la'. Following the sutra as a guide, Laurence ventures into some of the most remote places in Tibet. There, he meets monks, living Buddhas, nomads, and a Bodhisattva in disguise, who point out to him how they thought the road to Shambhala should be followed. Finally, the road leads him to Tashilumbo Monastery, where the Eleventh Panchen Lama resides and where the Shambhala Sutra calls home.

