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Anis of Dolma Ling: Buddhist Doctrine and Social Praxis Through the Monasticism of Tibetan Nuns in Exile

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***ANIS OF DOLMA LING:*
NEGOTIATING BUDDHIST DOCTRINE AND SOCIAL PRAXIS THROUGH THE
GENDER AND MONASTICISM OF TIBETAN NUNS IN EXILE**

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SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, SCRIPPS COLLEGE
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BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR NG
PROFESSOR KASSAM
PROFESSOR SHAW

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Nuns at Dolma Ling. Photograph taken by author.

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Photograph of Temple at Dolma Ling Nunnery in Sidhpur, H.P. Photograph taken by author.

Introduction

The figure of the Tibetan Buddhist nun as a female monastic is situated within a matrix of complexities and contradictions that are constituted by textual and doctrinal sources, Tibetan social views on gender and female monasticism, and experiential realities. In order to understand the situation of nuns, one first must understand that monasticism, mainly the order of monks, has been a highly respected and financially supported institution in Tibetan society for centuries. However, because the histories of Tibetan nuns and female renunciants have gone primarily undocumented, their lineages and stories are much more opaque than those of Tibetan monks. Therefore, most of the scholarship on female Buddhist practitioners, with the exception of a few extraordinary *yoginis*, dates after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in the 1950s. Historically it is believed that there were a few great

nunneries that existed centuries ago, but the majority of Tibetan nunneries have been smaller and lacking in the lay support and funding granted to monasteries. Currently, however, the landscape of Tibetan nuns is beginning to shift, as new resources and educational opportunities are beginning to be made available for Tibetan nuns in exile. It is on these nuns and nunneries in exile that this thesis will focus.

The heart of this thesis is ethnography. I carried out the entirety of my fieldwork at Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute, a branch of the Tibetan Nuns Project in Sidhpur, India, near Dharamsala. Dolma Ling Nunnery is a branch of the Tibetan Nuns Project, which is a non-profit organization that was formed in 1987 by current director Rinchen Khando Choegyal, in order to provide humanitarian aid and education to refugee nuns from Tibet and the surrounding Himalayan regions of India. Since 1987, through international support, the Tibetan Nuns Project has established Shugsep and Dolma Ling nunneries and also assists four other nunneries. Nuns in the six different nunneries represent all of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Moreover, the Tibetan Nuns Project sponsorship program has grown over the years to support over 650 nuns.

Dolma Ling Nunnery was the first nunnery built by and fully supported by the Tibetan Nuns Project. The nunnery, which took twelve years to complete, currently houses approximately 250 nuns. The facilities include housing, classrooms, an infirmary, kitchen, dining hall, library, and temple. Dolma Ling is dedicated to the higher education of Buddhist nuns from all traditions and offers educational programs previously unavailable to nuns. Such programs include philosophical debate and the prestigious *geshe* degree in Buddhist philosophy, which is the highest scholarly degree available to Tibetan monastics.

There are currently approximately five nuns at Dolma Ling working on this degree.¹ Moreover, Dolma Ling Nunnery was designed by a Delhi-based architect and aims to be environmentally sustainable. The nunnery works to be self-sustaining, growing most of its own food, and has recently earned funding for a project to install a solar-heated shower system. Dolma Ling also has a number of income-generating projects, which include a vegetable garden, paper-making, and the making of rosaries.

All of my interviews at Dolma Ling were conducted between April 20 and May 1, 2008. I met approximately one third of the nuns interviewed at meals in the mess hall or in the kitchen where I volunteered, so I had started to develop a relationship with these nuns before interviewing them. The rest of the interviews were set up with the help of Dolma Tsering of the Tibetan Nuns Project office, who organized my interviews with the nuns most proficient in English. The sampling was therefore diverse, but not completely random. By the time I conducted my interviews, moreover, many of the nuns were already familiar with my face, as I had been living at the nunnery for almost three weeks. Also, I was the only foreigner or layperson to take meals in the mess hall with the nuns; although I had a shaved head at the time, I stuck out like a sore thumb.

Furthermore, working in the kitchen helped me to develop more personal relationships with a wide variety of nuns throughout the weeks and also allowed me to contribute to the community in a concrete way. The conversations held while working in the kitchen each morning were some of the most valuable and noteworthy interactions I had with the nuns. While we chopped vegetables we shared stories of being homesick, which were especially pertinent in April when Chinese were cracking down on protests throughout Tibet

¹ For more information on the educational opportunities at Dolma Ling see Chapter 3: Experiences of Monasticism and the Nuns of Dolma Ling.

where many of the nuns' families live. Moreover, everyday conversations such as these helped me to gain a better understanding of the nuns' histories, families, monastic experiences, and lives.

In addition to the informal conversations, which are not used in any direct way in this thesis, I carried out comprehensive interviews with nine nuns at Dolma Ling. Eight of the interviews were recorded, while one was recorded with written notes, and therefore portions were quoted from memory. However, the majority of the quotes are verbatim so as not to tamper with the phrasing or meaning of the nuns. The atmosphere of the interviews was casual, but because the nuns were somewhat shy about their English I often found it necessary to ask questions. My questions covered a broad range of topics and included their experiences as female monastics, the reasons they renounced lay life, how the transformation from lay to monastic changed their self-perceptions about their gender and body, their beliefs about the differences between laywomen and nuns, and laymen and monks, and their beliefs about the status and capabilities of nuns (i.e. if they are a lower birth, if they can achieve enlightenment, if they suffer more than monks etc.).

Even though I spoke with the nuns of Dolma Ling more proficient in the English language, the language barrier still proved significant in a number of cases. I conducted almost all of the interviews without a translator, because of the lack of intimacy and confidentiality, and because of what is lost in translation. There were two times when Penpa of the Dolma Ling office stepped in to translate a concept or two. I continuously ran into difficulties while attempting to explain theoretical concepts, such as the difference between a female body and female gender. However, this challenged me to examine such concepts in new ways that translated to the nuns' context, so that I was able to convey them in their most

essential and comprehensible terms. In this way, I began to discover that gender may be represented experientially. With the nuns at Dolma Ling, in the Tibetan community in exile, gender is a lived experience and it is to be negotiated with the social, institutional, cultural, and religious realities of their everyday lives.

I also spoke briefly to Rinchen Khando Choegyal, sister in-law of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, former Minister of Education of the Central Tibetan Administration, and current director of the Tibetan Nuns Project. From our brief conversation, she was able to shed new light on the history of Tibetan nuns in Tibet, and caution me on making assumptions about the status of nuns. Because our discussion was very brief, I was only able to incorporate a small portion of her ideas into my research.

I interviewed nuns who held a variety of perspectives and beliefs about gender, Buddhism, monasticism, lay life, nunhood, and their own capabilities. Most of the nuns were between the ages of 20 to 35 years old. Some of the nuns are from India, while others were born in various regions of Tibet. Some have been nuns for over 20 years, while others merely 3 years. Every nun—save one—decided herself to renounce lay life and become a nun.

It is important to note that the nuns I interviewed at Dolma Ling cannot be seen as representative of the “typical” Tibetan nun. However, they can be seen as representing a younger ambitious generation of Tibetan nuns in exile, who have access to higher education and Buddhist philosophy, and actively question the old norms of gender hierarchy that previously limited nuns’ opportunities and access to education. These nuns are privileged in that they receive an elite education as compared to most nuns in Tibet. Therefore, their mastery of the English language is also not typical for Tibetan nuns in Tibet or exile. It is

possible that the language barrier or the shyness of some nuns prevented them from being critical about Dolma Ling or their experiences in Buddhism. However, my belief is that given their current opportunity to live and study at the amazing facilities at Dolma Ling, many of the nuns appear happy with their decision to become a nun, their standing in society, and their opportunities for higher learning and spiritual development. Most of the nuns I spoke with seemed genuinely grateful for the opportunity to live at Dolma Ling and to dedicate their lives to the study of Buddhism.

The nuns of Dolma Ling Nunnery come from various backgrounds and histories. Many made the arduous journey from Tibet to India, in pursuit of education or better opportunities. Others are local to North India, from places like Ladakh or Kinnaur. Each nun has had a unique monastic journey, some recent arrivals and others well-seasoned veterans. With each woman's monastic journey, comes a perspective shaped by her experiences. Moreover, the nuns of Dolma Ling hold a variety of opinions and understandings of gender. Some nuns explain that they shed all the gender associations connected to their female bodies when they renounced life as a laywoman. These nuns describe their femaleness as minimal, explaining that they often remain unconscious of their gender while at the nunnery, where they focus deeply in study and spiritual practice. Other nuns continue to see themselves as women, but recognize that their social roles as nuns are different than laywomen, because of their monastic vocation. These nuns recognize that although they are strongly committed to monasticism, they are still inherently female, and perform on a daily basis a markedly female monastic gender. In this thesis I will use my interviews with the nuns of Dolma Ling, primary canonical sources, and secondary scholarly literature to argue the complex ways in which Tibetan nuns in exile enact their monastic

gender through the negotiation of Buddhist doctrine and Tibetan socio-cultural views on gender roles and femaleness.

In chapter one I will situate the discussion of Tibetan nuns by discussing women in Buddhism, particularly through a lens of textual and doctrinal analysis. This chapter is important in that it provides the greater religious and prescriptive contexts for the nuns' experiences. I will first outline the traditional account of the formation of the nun's Order in India and explore the ways in which it presents the capabilities of female practitioners in the time of the Buddha. Then I will do a close analysis of the ways Buddhism has negotiated a doctrine of radical equality with beliefs about the inferiority of women's spiritual capacities, through the phenomenon of sexual transformation for enlightenment. I will next elaborate on the philosophical doctrines of emptiness and impermanence, noting their rejection of immaterial concepts such as gender, and the Mahāyāna move towards soteriological inclusiveness. I will then proceed to contemporize women in Tibetan Buddhism by addressing the *dākinī* principle and other models for female enlightenment.

In chapter two I will outline the social positions of women and nuns within Tibetan society, examining the ways that views on womanhood and female bodies have shaped the experience of female practitioners by justifying the inferiority of women. I will discuss the female body, reflecting on the suffering of women, and beliefs about women's status as a "low rebirth." I will also attempt to elucidate Tibetan understandings of the pollution of the female body, based on women's reproductive system and menstruation. In both of these sections I will bring in ethnographical data to include the opinions of the nuns from Dolma Ling nunnery. In chapter two I will also discuss lay conceptions of the gender of nuns as well as stereotypes about Tibetan nuns within the Tibetan community. After the

comprehensive analysis on the suffering of laywomen, I will conclude with a close study of the reasons for and experiences of renunciation, as well as the gendered transformation from lay to monastic. This chapter is important in that it sets up the gender hierarchy in Tibetan society, which has greatly informed Tibetan monasticism.

In chapter three I focus on the experiences of Tibetan nuns within the monastic framework. I explore the monastic gender hierarchy of monks and nuns, elucidating on the status of Tibetan nuns within society, and how it affects their experiences as monastics. I also focus on the resources, opportunities, and education available to Tibetan nuns in exile and at Dolma Ling, demonstrating the ways in which new opportunities such as philosophical debate for nuns are modeled after the centuries-old scholastic tradition of Tibetan monks. In this chapter I will also touch briefly on discourse surrounding the ordination status for Tibetan nuns. Chapter three is important in that it contemporizes the monastic gender hierarchy by examining how it limits the opportunities for nuns and exploring the ways in which it is slowly being subverted, through advanced monastic institutions such as Dolma Ling.

Chapter four is an extensive study of the views of Dolma Ling nuns on their own gender, and is structured as a microcosm of this thesis. In section one I tackle the complex gendered differences between nuns and laywomen, which relates back to the suffering of womanhood in chapter two. In section two I examine the ways nuns view themselves as different from monks, which relates back to the monastic hierarchy of chapter three, focusing on the nuns' views about their own bodies and minds as they relate to monks. Finally we will come full circle back to the first chapter, addressing the nuns' views on women in Buddhism and their own spiritual capabilities. The small sampling of the nine nuns

interviewed, however extensively, can by no means represent all of the opinions and experiences of the approximately 250 nuns at Dolma Ling Nunnery, or the views of all Tibetan nuns, for that matter. However, they are a sampling, representative of some of the nuns at Dolma Ling. Their words are a window, through which the reader can begin to comprehend the extremely complex picture of the lives and experiences of female monastics: the gendered experience of Tibetan nuns.

Chapter 1. Women in Buddhism and Buddhist Texts

In the immense cycles of time traversed by an infinitude of sentient beings, concepts of gender are understood to be fluid; beings are male in some lives, female in others, possibly androgynous or hermaphrodous in others, all wandering aimlessly in the wheel of samsara under the influence of karma and delusion. Clinging and aversion –to self and others, to species and gender, to ideas and phenomena –are sources of suffering that bind beings within the wheel of cyclic existence and prevent them from realizing their spiritual potential and ultimate happiness.²

I. Introduction: The Account of the Founding of the Nun's Order

It is extremely worthwhile in this project to begin by examining the Buddhist textual and philosophical underpinnings to the nuns' views on their own gender and societal gender norms at large. The doctrinal prescriptions present in the Buddhist sutras and subsequent writings have shaped the experiences of female practitioners since the foundation of the Order of nuns. Moreover, an understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhist concepts such as nonattachment, emptiness, impermanence, and the insubstantiality of phenomena, helps to elucidate the potential for a Buddhist model of soteriological inclusiveness. As eloquently put by Karma Lekshe Tsomo in the above quote, it is possible to reject gender as an insubstantial and impermanent phenomenon from within a uniquely Buddhist framework. One may also employ the amorphous and transcendent Tibetan symbol of the female embodiment of wisdom, the *dākinī*, as an ideal for feminine wisdom. These various frameworks work to uncover a potential for female enlightenment that is inclusive, transcendent of dualities, and already existent in Buddhist doctrine.

There is a famous story in both Pali and Sanskrit of the Sakyamuni Buddha's aunt, Mahāprajāpatī, and her ordination as the first Buddhist nun. The story of Mahāprajāpatī is

² Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Change in Consciousness: Women's Religious Identity in Himalayan Buddhist Cultures," *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) 186.

the traditional account of the founding of the Order of nuns, and although it is more mythical than factual, it is still widely accepted and influential. The story tells that Mahāprajāpatī supplicates for days before the Buddha, begging him to allow the ordination of nuns. After a number of rejections, Ananda, one of the Buddha's disciples, takes up her cause. He asks the Buddha if women are indeed capable of spiritual achievement and enlightenment, to which the Buddha replies that they are. As a result, Ananda tells the Buddha, "Women should then be allowed to become nuns, both because the Buddha acknowledges that they are capable of *arhatship*, and because he owes a great debt to Mahāprajāpatī, his foster mother."³ In recognizing that women can become *arhats*⁴, and therefore attain enlightenment and nirvana, the Buddha recognizes women's spiritual capacities. Moreover, the Buddha then concedes Ananda's point and allows the ordination of his aunt Mahāprajāpatī and the beginning of a female order. The Buddha agrees, however, only on the condition that she accepts eight rules in addition to the normal monastic precepts.⁵ These rules dictate the status of the order of nuns as clearly subordinate to the already established order of monks. For example, the rules require a nun, no matter how senior, to always defer to a monk, no matter how junior.⁶

This story is extremely important in that it situates the discourse about the religious paths available to women, both monastic and soteriological. The Buddha concedes that women can attain enlightenment and *arhatship*, the state in which one is released from the cycle of rebirth after attaining Nirvana. However, the Buddha simultaneously outlines the ways in which female monastics must subordinate themselves to monks, therefore restricting

³ Allen Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 14.

⁴ An *arhat* is one who has realized the goal of Nirvana and has thus transcended the cycle of rebirth.

⁵ Refer to chapter 3, Experiences of Monasticism and the Nuns of Dolma Ling, for a full translation of the Eight Heavy Rules.

⁶ Sponberg, 15.

the autonomy of female practitioners and reinstating them in an inferior position. The story of Mahāprajāpatī and the creation of the nun's Order highlights the central tension regarding the situation of female Buddhist practitioners. While women might share the inherent capacity for awakening that exists in male practitioners, their existence within the *sangha* causes social problems, which the Eight Heavy Rules attempt to alleviate.⁷

While there is substantial evidence to suggest that female disciples of the Buddha attained enlightenment and *arhatship* just like their male counterparts, over the centuries the inherent spiritual capacities of women have been contested. According to Hanna Havnevik, in *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns*, Mahāyāna texts vary in their positions towards soteriological inclusiveness. Some deny women the possibility of the bodhisattva path⁸, others argue for sexual transformation before enlightenment, while still others say that women can attain enlightenment just as men do. A woman's ability to attain enlightenment and Buddhahood is at the forefront of discourse surrounding gender in Buddhism. Can women attain enlightenment? If so, must they first change their gender or sex? Can women ever become bodhisattvas or Buddhas while maintaining their female form?

II. Enlightenment: Equal Opportunity?

In order to address these questions, we turn to Diana Paul, who is extremely useful in her analysis of the Buddhist sutras and scholarship relating to the soteriological opportunities available to women. In *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*, Paul states that the Mahāyāna sutras that deal with this issue all fall into one of three categories. The first type denies a woman's entrance into Buddha land. The second

⁷ *Sangha* is the term for the Buddhist monastic community.

⁸ A bodhisattva is one who has attained enlightenment, but has decided to remain in the cycle of rebirth in order to work to liberate all sentient beings from suffering.

accepts women as lower-stage bodhisattvas, but not Buddhas, while the third accepts women as advanced bodhisattvas as well as imminent Buddhas.⁹

Paul asserts that most of the Mahāyāna sutras fit the second category. She argues, “While women are acknowledged as spiritual assistants to the Buddha, on the one hand, they are relegated, on the other hand, to a lower stage of development than their male counterpart.”¹⁰ Paul thinks that the subordination of women’s authority and capabilities is resultant of both the Indian social climate of early Buddhism as well as the monastic hierarchy established by the Buddha as evident in the Eight Heavy Rules, thereby pointing to both contextual and scriptural factors to explain women’s subordination.¹¹

Because of the Mahāyāna move towards the universal ideal of the bodhisattva, it seems difficult for Mahāyāna scriptures to reject women as incapable of this path outright. However, there were also gender hierarchies, both monastic and lay, based on pervasive beliefs about women’s inferiority that made it difficult to accept soteriological inclusiveness. Beliefs about the feminine as representative of imperfection, weakness, ugliness, and impurity, in addition to the role of the temptress, were widely accepted in both Indian and Tibetan society.¹² Also, because of a woman’s role as child-bearer, she was seen as more embodied and earthly than man, and more deeply tied into the cycle of *samsara* and rebirth. All of these reasons were seen as obstacles too great for women to surmount. Moreover, Paul elucidates that “the implicit assumption is that she [the female practitioner] cannot, in her usual societal roles, overcome the impending fears of daily existence as the man can or is

⁹ Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 169.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹² *Ibid.*, 175.

expected to be able to overcome.”¹³ It is certainly arguable that the female practitioner, given her social role and status, is at more of a disadvantage than her male counterpart in terms of facing obstacles for spiritual achievement.

In her female body and female societal role, even an accomplished woman is typically viewed as a lower-stage bodhisattva. This understanding presupposes the impossibility of the attainment of Buddhahood in a female body. Here it is important to recognize a key doctrine developed by Mahāyāna Buddhism, and explicated by Diana Paul. In a number of Mahāyāna sutras, “a narrative theme known as the ‘transformation of sex’ (*parivrṭtavyañjana*) plays an important role in advocating a more equitable sociopolitical order.”¹⁴ Understood simply, the transformation of sex is a doctrine which allows accomplished female practitioners to change their sex to male in order to attain enlightenment and potentially become Buddhas in the future. This theme is important in that it makes the highest stages of enlightenment available to women, provided they no longer retain their gender and sex. While transformation of sex might initially seem no different than denying the potential for female enlightenment outright, the discourse is actually more nuanced and inclusive than perspectives that universally reject female enlightenment.

Instead, it is interesting to examine this theme from a place of agency, rather than loss. Paul argues that sexual change is symbolic of the perfection of one’s spiritual role. She explains, “The sexual change occurs when the mind seeks enlightenment through the practice of the Perfection of Wisdom, that is, when one enters the Bodhisattva path.”¹⁵ While a feminist might have trouble accepting a doctrine that requires a woman to give up her

¹³ Ibid., 181.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170.

¹⁵ Ibid., 177.

femaleness in order to attain higher spiritual achievement, sexual transformation played a key role in opening up the soteriological options available to women at the time.

In “Can Women Achieve Enlightenment? A Critique of Sexual Transformation for Enlightenment,” Hae-ju Sunim adeptly makes the distinction that while Mahāyāna texts may advocate sexual transformation, none of the texts give evidence of sexual discrimination. Moreover, she argues, “the idea of enlightenment through sexual transformation does not reflect sexism with regard to the attainability of enlightenment, but rather, represents an iconoclastic position intended to correct prejudicial views toward women.”¹⁶ That is, like Diana Paul, Sunim argues that sexual transformation has acted as a tool providing women with opportunities, and never blatantly discriminating against women or their capabilities. In this light, sexual transformation can be seen as a transitional strategy that eventually led to the acceptance by many of the possibility of enlightenment, and by some, of Buddhahood, in a woman’s body.

Sunim discusses a number of sutras that deal with sexual transformation in this way. One main example is the story of the daughter of the dragon-king Sāgra in the Devadatta chapter of the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra*, which is also known as the *Lotus Sutra*. The story tells of the dragon-king’s daughter, whose youth and femaleness do not hinder her astounding aptitude for Buddhist teachings and practices. One day, upon meeting the daughter of the dragon-king, Sāriputra challenges her thus:

‘You think that you will be able to attain unsurpassed enlightenment and become a Buddha before long. This is difficult to believe because the body of a woman is too defiled to be a recipient of the teachings of the Buddha. How can you attain unsurpassed Bodhi [enlightenment]? ... A woman has five impossibilities [hindrances]. How can it be that you, being a woman, will become a Buddha, quickly or not?’ ... Thereupon the congregation saw that

¹⁶ Hae-ju Sunim, “Can Women Achieve Enlightenment? A Critique of Sexual Transformation for Enlightenment,” *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) 138.

the daughter of the dragon-king changed into a man all of a sudden, performed the Bodhisattva practices, went to the Spotless World in the south, sat on a jeweled lotus-flower, attained perfect enlightenment, obtained the thirty-two major marks and the eight minor marks [of the Buddha] and began to expound the Wonderful Dharma to the living beings of the worlds of the ten quarters... The Accumulated-Wisdom Bodhisattva, Sāriputra, and all the other living beings in the congregation received the Dharma faithfully and in silence.¹⁷

The story of the daughter of the dragon-king is fascinating in that it documents the innumerable accomplishments of the dragon-king's daughter, maintaining the validity of her capabilities. She is portrayed throughout the story as exceedingly adept, contradicting Sāriputra and the five hindrances, both of which claim that women cannot become Buddhas. Why then, is it necessary for the dragon-king's daughter to suddenly change her sex before attaining enlightenment? The story seems to indicate that she is more than qualified to attain enlightenment in her female body, which makes her seemingly unnecessary transformation of sex even more paradoxical. Sunim agrees, proposing that it might have been possible for her to attain enlightenment without transformation, and cites a few translations of the Devadatta chapter in which the girl does not transform her sex.

These inconsistencies, even within this one story, help elucidate the doctrinal contradictions and negotiations that take place within many such Mahāyāna sutras. The inconsistencies most likely result from Mahāyāna Buddhist attempts to reconcile the idea of sexual transformation with certain Mahāyāna views that allow for female enlightenment. Moreover, it is important to note that the story maintains that the girl's enlightenment and accomplishments taught Sāriputra a lesson about the capabilities of women, regardless of sexual transformation. Although all factors indicate that the dragon-king's daughter was clearly capable of attaining enlightenment in her eight year-old female body, the

¹⁷ Senchu Murano, trans., *The Lotus Sutra: The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma* (Tokyo: Nichiren Shu Simbun Co. Ltd., 1974) 200-202.

transformation of her sex was necessary to appease beliefs about the impossibility of female enlightenment, but does not necessarily discredit the accomplishments of the dragon-king's daughter. Therefore, in negotiating the complexities of contradictory social and religious views on women, sexual transformation functioned as a tool to cohere and reconcile opposing viewpoints. Moreover, also within the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra*, are inclusive views that Sunim argues may have paved the way for the idea of sexual transformation for female enlightenment. Necessarily, she also recognizes that sexual transformation might be regarded as resulting from a specific historical current, that is, from the negotiation of soteriological inclusiveness of Mahāyāna Buddhists with a tradition of sexual transformation that potentially originated from a separate Devadatta sect. Within the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra* there is evidence for differing viewpoints on the spiritual capacities of women, resulting from different historical and social contexts.

Furthermore, Hanna Havnevik argues that a number of sutras, including the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* and the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, or the Perfection of Wisdom, make the claim that sex is irrelevant for reaching Buddhahood. Havnevik claims that this is due to the two levels of truth within Buddhism, mainly, that “people with ordinary wisdom see the difference between man and woman, but those who grasp the teaching of Emptiness, understand that this difference is illusory.”¹⁸ That is, though differences between the sexes appear real and fixed they are rendered empty on an ultimate level, which will be explored in depth in section III of this chapter. Because all beings have Buddha nature, sex becomes irrelevant for the achievement of liberation.

¹⁸ Hanna Havnevik, *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns*, (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1990) 30.

Miriam Levering elucidates the Chinese Sung Ch’an understandings of gender and its role in enlightenment in “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender: The Rhetoric of Equality and the Rhetoric of Heroism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. In Miriam Levering’s analysis of Chinese Ch’an Buddhism, the Ch’an tendencies towards radical inclusiveness expose the potential for egalitarianism across Buddhist traditions. In the Ch’an tradition, Levering argues, “Enlightenment is the realization of a total transcendence of gender distinctions, which are revealed as phenomenal appearances that are ultimately irrelevant.”¹⁹ Enlightenment, open to all sentient beings, is the transcendence of phenomenal reality, and thus provides a justification for the immateriality of gender.

As was stated earlier, the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra* teaches universal salvation in addition to sexual transformation. The bodhisattva vehicle, as evident in the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra*, is a soteriologically inclusive model that contrasts with the *śrāvaka* view that women cannot attain Buddhahood. In the Encouragement chapter of the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra*, moreover, the Buddha acknowledges the future enlightenment and Buddhahood of Mahāprajāpatī and six thousand other *bhikṣuṇīs* without mention of sexual transformation: “Now you, who desire to know your future destiny, shall, in the world to come, become a great teacher of the Law... and these six thousand *bhikṣuṇīs* will all become teachers of the Law. This Buddha Loveliness and the six thousand bodhisattvas will in turn be predicted to [attain] Perfect Enlightenment.”²⁰ Therefore, the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra* provides both the philosophical backing for enlightenment within a female body as well as concrete examples of such accomplished women. In that it

¹⁹ Miriam Levering, “Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch’an and Gender: The Rhetoric of Equality and the Rhetoric of Heroism,” *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 170.

²⁰ Bunnō Katō, Yoshirō Tamura and Kōjirō Miyasaka, trans., *The Three Fold Lotus Sutra* (New York: John Weatherhill Inc., 1975) 216.

advocates for both the accomplishments of the dragon-king's daughter and universal salvation, the *Saddharmapundarīka Sutra* propagates positive and encouraging views of female practitioners, in contrast to the traditional ethos of women as obstacles to male spiritual welfare.

Many scholars such as Havnevik and Sunim hold up the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* as a key Buddhist text in which androcentric ideals promoted in previous soteriologies are obviated. According to Sunim, the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* clearly elaborates the nondualistic view of the “*śūnyavāda*.”²¹ The sutra visibly shifts away from sexual transformation towards a nondualistic integration of spiritual awakening. In this sutra, it is evident that previous stories of sexual transformation, such as that of the dragon-king's daughter, played a role in countering the idea that women are incapable of becoming Buddhas, and laid the foundation for soteriological inclusiveness, among other Mahāyāna ideals depicted in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*.

In the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, translated by Burton Watson, the ideals of nondualism and universal Enlightenment unfold. In Chapter 7, entitled “Regarding Living Beings,” a goddess appears in Vimalakīrti's room in order to engage some of the Buddha's disciples in dialogue regarding their understanding of the Laws of Buddhism. Immediately she engages Sāriputra in a discussion about the meaning of reality and emancipation. Soon Sāriputra asks the goddess why she does not choose to change out of her female body, given her advanced understanding of the Dharma and supernatural abilities. In response the goddess challenges Sāriputra's understanding of the nature of phenomena by temporarily transforming him into a goddess like herself. She explains,

²¹ Sunim, 138.

‘All things are just the same –they have no fixed form... Sāriputra, who is not a woman, appears in a woman’s body. And the same is true of all women—though they appear in a women’s bodies, they are not women. Therefore the Buddha teaches that all phenomena are neither male nor female... All things are just like that—they do not exist, yet do not not exist. And that they do not exist, yet do not not exist is exactly what the Buddha teaches.’²²

Through this scene of “gender play,” the goddess challenges Sāriputra to accept the non-dual nature of phenomena, and therefore to let go of his current understandings of the fixed or inherent nature of gender. Here Sāriputra eventually comprehends that the learned goddess chooses to remain in her female form, because she would not gain anything by transforming her gender or sex. Moreover, according to Diana Paul in *Women in Buddhism*, “The masquerade or magical act of changing sex reinforces the teaching in Mahāyāna Buddhism that all phenomena are illusory.”²³ That is, the mere fact that sexual transformation exists is proof of the mutable nature of gender. Because there is nothing essential about the female or male form, gender is irrelevant to spiritual growth and capacities.

The *Vimalakīrti Sutra* was one of the most popular sutras used to promote Mahayana tenets such as the bodhisattva ideal, dependent co-origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*), emptiness, and non-dualism. Moreover, the above dialogue perfectly embodies the core issues regarding women and enlightenment, mainly that the key tenets of Mahayana Buddhism make debate over sexual transformation somewhat of a moot point. According to Paul, the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* shows that all phenomena are “originally quiescent and naturally tending toward Nirvana, without distinct characteristics, and that they are inexpressible, and inconceivable, equal and nondual, that is, all phenomena are Empty.”²⁴ Through the

²² Burton Watson, *The Vimalakīrti Sutra*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 91.

²³ Paul, 221.

²⁴ Paul, 222.

understanding of Mahayana texts such as these, the denial of innate and immutable gender or sex is, necessarily, a corollary of emptiness.²⁵

While sexual transformation can be seen as a stepping stone on the doctrinal path towards soteriological inclusiveness, it was eventually critiqued and made null by Mahāyāna philosophies on emptiness and nonattachment to gender. If phenomena such as gender are empty of inherent meaning or essential identity, then sex and gender are merely inconsequential characteristics of a person, and are in no way indicative of spiritual potentialities.

III. Gender as an Immaterial Phenomenon

Authors such as Heng-ching Shih explicate understandings of the immateriality of gender in a Buddhist context. In “The Potentialities of Women in the Mahayana Vehicle”, Heng-ching Shih explains how the concepts of *samsara* and cyclical existence within Buddhism are reasons for maintaining nonattachment to labels such as gender. She argues, “since there is only one moment, literally one breath, between this lifetime and the next, it is rather futile and naïve to get bound up in the conception of oneself as either female or male.”²⁶ For Shih, gender is immaterial, in that our physical reality shifts with each brief lifetime, making such conceptions ephemeral and impermanent. Although they seem solid and substantial, Buddhism teaches that the labels with which we mark our bodies and identify are simply constructs lacking in inherent value or meaning. As such, clinging to a fixed identity based on a specific species, race, or gender, is a manifestation of self-grasping, and will ultimately lead to disappointment.

²⁵ Ibid., 233.

²⁶ Heng-ching Shih, “The Potentialities of Women in the Mahayana Vehicle,” *Daughters of the Buddha*, (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1988) 80.

Many of the Mahāyāna tenets, moreover, can be used in this way to argue for a gender-inclusive, or perhaps more appropriately, a non-gendered understanding of enlightenment. In *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, Jose Cabezón notes that while the understanding of gender as a cultural construct is an insight of modernity, it has had been visible for centuries in Buddhist philosophy.²⁷ He argues that Buddhists have always been conscious of gender issues, even though self-conscious theories of gender as culturally constructed may not have existed within the Buddhist discourse. From stories of the first ordination of nuns to Pali sutras with feminine symbology, gender has been on the Buddhist radar for centuries.

What is especially important here is not that Buddhists have been aware of gender, but *how* they have been aware of gender. Especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism, gender has been rearticulated in terms of the Mahāyāna doctrines of emptiness and no-self. Alan Sponberg argues that nonattachment to gender can be seen as a direct result of the doctrine of no-self (*anatman*), because the individual has no ultimately essential or immutable nature.²⁸ A person lacking in fixed nature would not remain attached to his or her gender, because it is a characteristic subject to the changing individual, and therefore void of essential meaning. Moreover, in *Women in Buddhism*, Diana Paul resonates with Sponberg, in her treatment of gender and impermanence. She explains that there can be no beings with inalienable gender characteristics if all phenomena are insubstantial and impermanent. Impermanence exposes the illusion of sex and gender as qualities innate to human existence and experience. The deconstruction of dichotomies is an essential philosophical move towards embracing the empty and non-dual nature of reality.

²⁷ Jose Cabezón, *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) xv.

²⁸ Sponberg, 10.

However, if one finds the total rejection of gender confounding, one might examine the possibility of two levels of “truth” or reality on which gender operates. On the philosophical and ultimate levels, Mahāyāna Buddhism may argue that gender is constantly subject to change, devoid of essential meaning, and therefore not real. On the practical and socio-political levels, however, gender functions as a very real entity, laden with social meaning and value. Allen Sponberg argues for the “soteriological insignificance” of gender and sex differences in terms of the goal of liberation.²⁹ Gender matters because societies give it meaning, allowing gender to determine one’s status and capabilities. Therefore, gender differences do exist, but only on a level of phenomenal insubstantiality; in terms of enlightenment, gender is irrelevant.

Sponberg agrees that on the ultimate level gender becomes a non-issue. However, he acknowledges what he calls “the failure [of Buddhists] to distinguish the limitations of social gender roles from the assumptions of inherent sexual limitations with regard to the pursuit of liberation.”³⁰ While one might recognize the reality of gender on a social level, one need not assume that gender differences play a role in the attainment of enlightenment. That is, it is important to acknowledge that being a woman in society may provide one with difficulties and limitations due to childbirth and gender-based social restrictions. Nonetheless, these realities do not incapacitate a woman in the religious realm of Buddhist cultivation. Moreover, Sponberg explains that including women in the ability to achieve liberation does not de facto imply social equality between men and women. He elucidates that in the sutras which argue for soteriological inclusiveness, nothing is asserted about the social rights of women or their status within society. Inclusiveness does not advocate “sameness” of gender

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

or a lack of “hierarchical differentiation” within society at large.³¹ In its inclusion of women on the path of liberation, Mahāyāna Buddhism is not pushing a feminist agenda by any means.

According to Sponberg, these attitudes hold true today for many Buddhists. He argues that many Asian Buddhists today, think that women have full access to the *Dharma*, but also maintain the immutability of sex difference, claiming that men are socially and spiritually superior by nature. While this position is difficult for many feminists to get behind, we must not reinterpret or assign false meanings to the Buddhist move towards inclusiveness. Soteriological inclusiveness, at least from a Mahāyāna viewpoint, exists because the exclusion of women from enlightenment is unfounded, based on an unsubstantial characteristic such as sex. Moreover, it is understood that even during the time of the Buddha, women were said to have achieved enlightenment. Sponberg agrees, arguing that many traditional sources depict women as fully liberated *arhats*, free from the suffering of human existence.³² That is, a model for female enlightenment, although without gender equality in the social realm, has existed for centuries.

The importance of recognizing the distinction between ultimate and social realities cannot be stressed enough. In *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*, Kim Gutschow argues: “Although he [the Buddha] proclaimed the insubstantiality of phenomenal reality—including gender—he recognized that admitting women to a celibate male order would create some havoc.”³³ Here Gutschow provides a reminder of the story of the Buddha’s aunt Mahāprajāpatī, and the Eight Heavy Rules.

³¹ Ibid., 12.

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ Kim Gutschow, *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004) 217.

Positing a similar argument as Sponberg and Levering earlier, Gutschow differentiates between gender's insubstantiality on an idealized spiritual level, and its very real presence within the Buddhist social consciousness, as beliefs about the inherent inferiority of women have clearly shaped the 2500-year history of the order of nuns.³⁴

In her analysis, Hanna Havnevik is sure to reference the obvious role that gender has played in shaping the experience of Tibetan nuns. In a similar vein as Gutschow, Havnevik argues, "The inferior position of the nuns is partly related to cultural values transplanted to the monastic situation, where nuns and monks apply sexist norms acquired in a male-dominated majority society to an organizational structure and a monastic milieu."³⁵ That is, the social norms of Tibetan society have played a prominent role in shaping the monastic institutions of Tibet.

Jose Cabezón also emphasizes the use of religion as an instrument of legitimization for gender inequality. He discusses how social conceptions of gender alter the face of religion over time. He provides the example of how the use of gendered symbols in a religious text affects societal perception on the meaning of gender, and often prescribes such meanings.³⁶ Moreover, Cabezón inquires, "What kind of cues do religious institutions take from societal norms concerning gender?"³⁷ This question is extremely thought provoking in that it forces one to confront the ways that religious institutions, especially monastic ones, draw on the social norms of society at large. One must recognize the importance of social norms in shaping Buddhism, because society and religion are inextricably connected and always in dialogue with one another.

³⁴ Ibid., 272.

³⁵ Havnevik, 143.

³⁶ Cabezón, xiv.

³⁷ Ibid., xv.

IV. *Dākinīs* and the Female Principle: Models for Female Practitioners

As stated above, the majority of enlightened beings within the Mahāyāna and Tibetan canons are male. According to Karma Lekshe Tsomo, it is difficult to find a female Buddhist ideal within the tradition.

Most Tibetan cultural heroes and Sakyamuni Buddha, the central prototype of an enlightened being, are male, but spiritual role models also appear in female form. Although fewer in number than men, highly realized women are an integral feature of Tibetan history and cosmology, widely recognized and greatly revered for their spiritual achievements.³⁸

While there are examples of accomplished female practitioners, these women are the exception rather than the rule. Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues that improving images of the feminine is a crucial step in promoting women's spiritual wellbeing. She sees female imagery as a possible tool to unite the polarity of theoretical possibilities and everyday realities. In *Dākinī's Warm Breath: the Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism*, Judith Simmer-Brown makes a similar case to that of Karma Lekshe Tsomo. She argues, "While there exist hagiographies of remarkable female teachers of Tibet, it is clear that these women were rare exceptions in a tradition dominated by androcentric and patriarchal monastic structure."³⁹ While these *yoginīs* provide a valuable model of female enlightenment and spiritual accomplishment, their exceptional nature makes them more of an ideal than an everyday reality.

These enlightened women, however limited in number, play an important role in the lives of most female and even male practitioners. Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues, "Enlightened beings in female form are an integral part of the lives of both women and men from childhood on... They exhibit strength, compassion, wisdom, and are an immanent

³⁸ Lekshe Tsomo, 186.

³⁹ Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dākinī's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2001) 34.

presence in the lives of ordinary people.”⁴⁰ That is, these female enlightened beings provide a model for female and male practitioners alike, in that they are important both because of their gendered principle and because of their connection to the perfection of wisdom.

One specifically Tibetan way that Buddhism honors the female is in the figure of the *dākinī*. While *dākinīs*, or enlightened beings in female form, are a part of the spiritual landscape of most Tibetan practitioners, regardless of gender, their importance for female practitioners in particular cannot be understated. According to Judith Simmer-Brown, “Meaning given to gender symbols in a Tibetan setting contributes in unexpected ways to the social roles of women, to gender attitudes, and to the success of women on the spiritual path.”⁴¹ The lack of female models and negative portrayals of the feminine within Tibetan Buddhism might make women feel inadequate for the serious practice of Buddhism, because they see a male body as necessary for success in their spiritual endeavors. In some capacities the *dākinī* as a female embodiment of wisdom, provides a model for transcendent intelligence that is uniquely female, a model that privileges femaleness. Moreover, Simmer-Brown continues, “the *dākinī* lore provides genuine support for women practitioners, whether Tibetan or Western, to develop confidence, perseverance, and inspiration in their meditation practice.”⁴² Instead of meditating on or emulating a male Buddha, the female practitioner has the opportunity of focusing on the female principle. While oftentimes her femaleness may be seen as a disadvantage, potentially detrimental for spiritual cultivation, the female practitioner finds validation and legitimacy in the figure of the *dākinī*.

The figure of the *dākinī*, moreover, points to one of the essential issues at the intersection of gender and Buddhism, mainly that there are many contradictions about the

⁴⁰ Lekshe Tsomo, 177.

⁴¹ Simmer-Brown, 10.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7.

spiritual potential of women. According to Karma Lekshe Tsomo, among many other scholars on gender in Buddhism, Himalayan Buddhist women often receive conflicting information about their gender, role in society, and spiritual potential. On the one hand, women are said to be capable of achieving enlightenment and are given powerful models of the feminine, such as the *dākinī*, to model after. On the other hand, Tibetan society places women at the bottom of the gendered hierarchy. Moreover, Simmer-Brown analyzes a similar trend in her work. She argues that “studies of gender in the Buddhist tradition suggest a general pattern of institutional patriarchy accompanied by a contrasting doctrinal promise of the inherent spiritual capabilities of women.”⁴³ These contradictions between the capabilities and value of women on the social and ultimate levels have implications for women in an institutional and ritual level, excluding some women from positions of power regardless of their inherent potential. In other words, the fact that women enjoy soteriological inclusiveness does not provide them with social equality in Tibetan society.

Here it is helpful to bring in Yeshe Tsogyal, known in the Nyingma tradition as the Great Bliss Queen. Yeshe Tsogyal, among the most famous and esteemed of the Tibetan human *yoginīs*, is often described as a wisdom *dākinī* in that she was seen by many to have the three bodies of enlightenment: the subtle and empty expanse of mind, the meditational deity form, and the outer expression of the embodied *dākinī*.⁴⁴ Both a consort of Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche, as well as a treasure seeker and teacher of her own transmissions, Yeshe Tsogyal is one of the most esteemed Tibetan *yoginīs* in history. Simmer-Brown argues that even the greatest of *yoginīs* were affected by society’s views on women. She explains, “the depictions of the hardships of Tibetan *yoginīs* in sacred

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 65-9. For a more detailed analysis of Yeshe Tsogyal and the three bodies of enlightened *dākinīs*, see Simmer-Brown.

biographies are not thinly veiled feminist tracts; they are acknowledgment of the specific difficulties that women experience, which lead to a life of committed practice and successful realization.”⁴⁵ That is, these female practitioners acknowledged their hardships, but couched them in a larger understanding of and dedication to the Buddhist path of realization, through their understandings of suffering and nonattachment. In a similar vein, Yeshe Tsogyal acknowledges the obstacles that women specifically face on the path to enlightenment. In that the *yoginīs* made a point to acknowledge gender discrimination as a legitimate part of their spiritual path, these women became agents of their own journeys; they acknowledged but were not stopped by the social conditions in which they lived.

In *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*, Anne Klein argues that *yoginīs* such as Yeshe Tsogyal overcame hardships based on gender, managing to escape the limitations of their femaleness by becoming renowned Buddhist masters. Their existence in the Tibetan lineage has served to further legitimate the spiritual capabilities of women. Klein argues, “the qualities of courage, nobility, and perseverance detailed in Yeshe Tsogyal’s biography dramatically state women’s capacity for enlightenment and contribute to the prevailing Mahāyāna view that women are as suited as men for the most exalted teachings of Buddhism, as well as for Buddhahood itself.”⁴⁶ In this way esteemed *yoginīs* forged the path for female followers to come, providing a successful, realistic model of female enlightenment, acknowledging both success and hardship.

It is pertinent now to define and analyze the figure of the *dākinī*, who represents the enlightened form of female wisdom and the other-worldly aspects of female *yoginīs* like Yeshe Tsogyal. It is important to note that there is much ambiguity in both Western and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁶ Anne Carolyn Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 158-9.

Tibetan scholarship as to what precisely the *dākinī* is, because her transcendent nature makes her difficult to conceptualize.⁴⁷ Janice D. Willis defines the *dākinī* as “the embodiment of the highest wisdom and as the symbolic concretization of the direct, unmediated, and non-conceptual experience of voidness.”⁴⁸ Anne Klein is in accordance with both Willis and Simmer-Brown in that she believes that the *dākinī* is transcendent of dualities.

The specific wisdom that defines *dākinīs* is the nondualistic and vibrant knowing of a reality that Geluks call emptiness and that is described in a phrase unique to Nyingma as ‘beginningless purity’ (*ka dag*) or ‘primordial freedom’ (*ye ‘grol*). The *dākinī* moves in space because she fully understands and is active in this great sphere of primordial purity and freedom.⁴⁹

It is clear here that the *dākinī* functions on the ultimate and transcendent level of reality discussed earlier. Moreover, it is on this level that gender distinctions dissipate, rendering such phenomena mutable and ultimately empty.

Maintaining a similar understanding of the ultimate level of truth, Willis argues that one must not take the gender of the *dākinī* for granted. In fact, Willis argues, “‘she’ is not ‘female,’” although she usually appears in female form.⁵⁰ On the ultimate level that transcends dichotomous understandings of gender, the *dākinī* is not female, although she maintains certain characteristics which can be viewed as feminine. Both Willis and Simmer-Brown qualify the *dākinī* as feminine, but not female. Moreover, this subtle and complex gender distinction is rooted in the Tibetan Vajrayāna understanding of the feminine and masculine principles, which exist in relation to each other, but do not represent inherent gender. The Vajrayāna use of femaleness and maleness is inextricably linked to the tantric union of dualities such as Nirvana and *samsara*, body and mind, and the masculine and

⁴⁷ Simmer-Brown, 5.

⁴⁸ Janice D. Willis, “Dākinī; Some Comments on Its Nature and Meaning,” *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women in Tibet*, (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1990) 58.

⁴⁹ Klein, 159.

⁵⁰ Willis, 72.

feminine.⁵¹ The *dākinī*, therefore, takes the feminine form, but her nature transcends embodied gender dualities altogether. Simmer-Brown further argues, “The *dākinī* is, from this perspective, more than a singular symbol and more than a feminine deity. She represents a kind of ‘feminine principle,’ a domain of spiritual experience beyond conventional, social, or psychological meanings of gender.⁵²” In that the *dākinī* exists in the realm of the ultimate, her nature transcends the gendered meanings of society. Her very essence deconstructs dualisms, and challenges one to conceptualize an existence without male or female, subject or object.⁵³

In a paradigm without “otherness,” there can be no contradictions, which means that the mind is infinitely open and expansive, allowing for any number of multiple understandings and conceptions of reality and phenomena. Transcending the dualistic world, Klein argues that “the figure of the Great Bliss Queen [the *dākinī* Yeshe Tsogyal] is itself an expression of primordial purity, emptiness, or innate awareness. In this sense, she is not a symbol.”⁵⁴ Here Klein moves to dissolve the boundaries between the subject and object, in that the Buddhist practitioner becomes one with the figure of the *dākinī*. She is no longer a model, but rather a primordial oneness with which to merge in a deep state of practice. In that the practitioner becomes one with the *dākinī*, symbolically or actually, he or she becomes the agent of change, dissolving and assigning meanings based on lived encounters with the ultimate.

Scholars such as Simmer-Brown negotiate, in their analysis, between two seemingly contradictory modes of thought. On the one hand, they want to maintain the femaleness of

⁵¹ John S. Strong, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*, (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995). 197.

⁵² Simmer-Brown, 40.

⁵³ Klein, 168.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

the *dākinī* principle in order to use it to affirm images of the feminine in Tibetan Buddhism and encourage female practitioners. On the other hand, because they believe that gender differences are insubstantial on an ultimate level and irrelevant to spiritual practice, they also reject the *dākinī* as uniquely female in nature. In order to reconcile these understandings it is helpful to turn to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness. Simmer-Brown explains that emptiness is expressed in form as the *dākinī*, who is absent of inherent existence. As such, the *dākinī* principle is representative of the transcendence of duality, because while her form appears feminine, it is essentially a manifestation of a formless form. As a symbol the *dākinī* is both “semantically ambiguous” and “multivalent,” making it impossible to understand “her” true nature.⁵⁵ Moreover, Simmer-Brown argues that the *dākinī* has always been illusive in nature and explains that Vajrayāna practitioners often fail to see *dākinī* when “she” is directly in front of them.

Moreover, in that she redefines the meanings of gender for human beings, the *dākinī* is essential in re-conceptualizing the female body. Here both Klein and Simmer-Brown draw on the Vajrayāna revalorization of the feminine principle and female body. According to Klein, “Her womb and other female organs are emblematic of enlightened wisdom and the state of Buddhahood itself.”⁵⁶ In using the imagery of a womb, Klein calls upon the Mahāyāna doctrine of the *Tathāgatagarbha*, which explains that the potentiality for enlightenment exists within all living beings. The “*garbha*” can be translated as womb, matrix, embryo, or seed, indicating the inherent potential for enlightenment that can be grown and nurtured with Buddhist practice.⁵⁷ This positive female imagery shows practitioners that the female body is something to be prized and respected, rather than

⁵⁵ Simmer-Brown, 43.

⁵⁶ Klein, 160.

⁵⁷ Strong, 155.

rejected for its defilements. Furthermore, Simmer-Brown explains that the sacredness of the body is essential in tantric practice. She argues that respect for women and female bodies are fundamental to Vajrayāna practice, as they are symbolic of sacred wisdom and femininity. This project of redefining the female body in terms of wisdom rather than impurity is one of the ways that the Vajrayāna tradition has revolutionized Buddhism.

Klein notes the importance of this unpredictable philosophical move to idealize the female body, the same “body that in some Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions epitomizes defilements to be abandoned.”⁵⁸ However, it is important to note that these divergent representations of the female body are certainly not true for all Tibetans. From my personal encounters with Tibetans in exile, one would be hard pressed to find Tibetans who viewed the womb as an “expanse of reality” or “ubiquitous matrix.”⁵⁹ Simmer-Brown is quick to recognize that it is still extremely common within Tibetan society to view the female body as inferior. Tibetans commonly refer to women as inferior births. This can be seen, not as an innate inferiority as some scholars have argued, but as a realistic understanding of the lives of Tibetan women, both of which will be discussed in depth in the subsequent chapter.⁶⁰ Moreover, Simmer-Brown argues that scholars such as Ann Klein have shown that there is a clear distinction between the seemingly egalitarian symbol of the *dākinī* and the actual lives of Tibetan women. Simmer-Brown and Klein both point precisely to this division between social realities and religious ideals.

V. Conclusion

The tension explored by Simmer-Brown and Klein constitutes the crux of the intersection between gender and religion, which pervades much of Tibetan scholarship and

⁵⁸ Klein, 160.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁰ Simmer-Brown, 206.

popular opinion. Differing beliefs about the spiritual capabilities of women are still widespread within the Tibetan community. Moreover, the possibility of female enlightenment on the spiritual and ultimate level, while gender inequalities persist on the social level, is very real within Tibetan society. Furthermore, the belief that gender distinctions are essentially impermanent and empty does not deny the very pertinent and real gender hierarchies within Tibetan society, which will be discussed in the next two chapters of this thesis. While it is helpful to recognize models for female enlightenment, such as Yeshe Tsogyal and the figure of the *dākinī*, these ideals are not a cure-all for Tibetan gender inequalities.

This chapter has attempted to show that even within Tibetan Buddhism there exist extremely divergent and contradictory notions of women and the feminine. While some Buddhist texts depict women as defiled, lustful or greedy, the Tanta regards women as the incarnation of wisdom. Some argue for the necessity of sexual transformation, while others maintain that the capabilities of female practitioners render such notions obsolete. Thus, Tibetan female practitioners are presented contradicting pictures of their own worth. These ambiguous ideologies exemplify the ways that Buddhism has functioned to both legitimize the inferiority of female practitioners and also defend their worth as qualified and skillful adepts. Moreover, contradicting ideologies are further complicated when the actual positions of women and nuns in Tibetan society are explored. The following chapter will examine Tibetan views on the female body and women within the hierarchy of rebirth, both of which inform women's status within society, and for some, occasion the rejection of lay life in favor of monasticism.

Chapter 2. Women's Suffering and Renunciation: Severing the Ties of Worldly Existence

*I am a woman – I have little power to resist danger.
Because of my inferior birth, everyone attacks me.
If I go as a beggar, dogs attack me.
If I have wealth and food, bandits attack me.
If I look beautiful, the lustful attack me.
If I do a great deal, the locals attack me.
If I do nothing gossips attack me.
If anything goes wrong, they all attack me.
Whatever I do, I have no chance for happiness.
Because I am a woman, it is hard to follow the Dharma. It is hard even to stay
alive!*⁶¹

I. Introduction

The previous chapter of this thesis discussed the traditional Buddhist texts and doctrines and the manner in which they have informed Tibetan views on gender, spirituality, and the human potential for Enlightenment. While beliefs about the egalitarian nature of Buddhism reside on the theoretical level, there exists a very real contradiction between theory and praxis. Karma Lekshe Tsomo notes that the lofty goals of Buddhist texts seem unattainable for Buddhist women trying to balance their religious practice with the mundane demands of the household.⁶² Perhaps this irreconcilable tension is most acute for Tibetan nuns, whose efforts at Buddhist practice are often thwarted by obstacles caused by the very gender they have learned is to be viewed as impermanent.

Based on the writings of Tibetan scholars and the ethnographic work of Hanna Havnevik, Kim Gutschow, and myself, this chapter attempts to outline a number of social factors that have informed the lives of Tibetan nuns. Tibetan beliefs about the bodies and

⁶¹ Havnevik, 179. Here Havnevik quotes the famous *yoginī* Yeshe Tsogyal, who was discussed in the previous chapter.

⁶² Lekshe Tsomo, 177-8.

minds of women have affected in a very real way the self-conceptions of Tibetan nuns and the religious opportunities available to them. Tibetan understandings of women as lower rebirths than men posit women as inferior beings, relegated to the realms of bodily suffering until they earn the coveted male rebirth. Beliefs about women's bodies as overly sexed and impure due to their reproductive functions affect the manner in which nuns are viewed, even though the nuns' renunciation and celibacy indicate their rejection of such notions and reproductive functions. These factors all play a role in how the Tibetan laity views nuns, affecting their patronage, support and respect of female monasticism.

II. Birth as the Fruits of *Karma*: Women as *Skye Dman* and the Embodiment of Suffering

The doctrine of *karma* is fundamental to an understanding of Tibetan women and nuns and their place within society. Simply put, the doctrine of *karma* states that the conditions of one's future rebirths are predetermined by one's moral actions in this lifetime. The details of one's birth, such as gender, wealth, and status, are seen as karmically determined by past lives. As such, the negative aspects of one's life are also understood as the result of bad *karma* from previous lives.

In *Exile as Change: The Tibetan Diaspora*, Karma Lekshe Tsomo explains how a traditional Buddhist understanding of *karma* influences Tibetan cultural views about the inferiority of women. A female rebirth is often viewed as resulting from "an inferior stock of merit" from one's previous lives, a view which traces back to Buddhist texts and Tibetan social views for centuries.⁶³ A similar understanding of *karma* has been used as justification for the gendered hierarchy within Tibetan society. In her research, Kim Gutschow found that many Zangskari and Tibetan women believe that they exist on a lower karmic rung than their

⁶³ Lekshe Tsomo, 348.

male counterparts due to their lesser storehouse of merit, a condition that is “irreversible in this lifetime”.⁶⁴ She notes that women’s inferiority is not believed to be derived from social or moral conditions or status, but rather from a predisposition due to negative *karma* from previous lives.

Gutschow also argues that the doctrine of *karma* is often used as the rationale for seemingly unequal social roles. When comparing the difficult situation of many Himalayan women with the social advantages of Himalayan men, many women conclude that they are inferior because of *karma*. Himalayan men must have accumulated a storehouse of merits from their previous lives in order to enjoy such privilege in their current lives. According to one of her female informants, who believes that the female body is punishment, “Women are more miserable than men because, as we say, wherever you look, men seem to be having a better time than women... We women are just plain unlucky; because as they say we still have not removed prior bad *karma*.”⁶⁵ Gutschow explains further that women’s lesser store of merit from past lives justifies both women’s suffering in this life and the fewer opportunities that exist for women to improve their karmic standing for the next life. As such, it is understandable that women see their disadvantageous status within the gender hierarchy as indicative of their *karma*.

There is also a pervasive belief that one should accept one’s social duties precisely because they are the result of leftover *karma*. The use of *karma* to validate the blind acceptance of one’s social roles might be problematic for a Western feminist audience. However, it is important to note that not all Tibetan women perform their social roles without question. As we will see later, a number of nuns are working actively to improve their social

⁶⁴ Kim Gutschow, “An Economy of Merit: Women and Buddhist Monasticism in Zangskar, Northwest India,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1998), 303.

⁶⁵ Gutschow, 215.

standing as well as their religious and educational opportunities, working to change traditional gender roles and hierarchies within contemporary Tibetan society. Moreover, the doctrine of *karma* does not deny agency to the human subject. Rather, one's moral actions in this lifetime directly affect the conditions of one's subsequent rebirths and have the potential to negatively or positively impact one's future.

The conditions of women within Tibetan society have led many to believe that being born a woman is the result of bad *karma*. Being born as a woman has a number of implications in Tibetan society that in general set women apart from their male counterparts. Kim Gutschow explains the negative connotations of the Tibetan words for "woman." The Tibetan terms for woman, both "lower rebirth" (*skye dman*) and "black one" (*nag mo*), clearly represent her lower status and her impure body, and date back to early Tibetan folklore.⁶⁶ The literal translation of *skye dman* indicates that women are lacking in merit, and therefore exist in a lower stratum than men in the gendered hierarchy of rebirth.

It is even more fascinating to examine *skye dman* when juxtaposed with the Tibetan word for "man," *skyes pa*. Gutschow explains that *skyes pa* literally means "birth," but it can also mean "adult" or connote "growth." The implication here is that women are somehow lacking in the maturation process, not fully adult or grown. This maturity can also be taken as figurative, indicating that women's karmic or spiritual status is deficient or underdeveloped. One nun interviewed by Hanna Havnevik recalled the Tibetan proverb, which states that the birth of a female is seventeen lifetimes lower than the birth of a male.⁶⁷ This understanding of the female birth as wanting in maturity and merit establishes women as subordinate to men in the hierarchy of rebirth. Moreover, the gender hierarchy is inherent in

⁶⁶ Gutschow, 212.

⁶⁷ Havnevik, 164.

a different translation of the Tibetan word for “women,” *bud med*, which literally means “that which can’t be put outside.”⁶⁸ When contrasted with the strong and invincible male body, the female body appears weak and vulnerable to sickness and rape. There was a general sentiment among nuns at Dolma Ling that women’s bodies are on the whole weaker than men’s, which many believe is a direct cause of women’s suffering.

Both Hanna Havnevik and I encountered many women who believe that women are indeed lower births. Because of the inferior status of women in both the hierarchy of rebirth and society in general, there is a common prayer that Tibetan women often say, which requests a male rebirth in the next life. Moreover, according to one young nun, “I guess that since the Lord Buddha has said that women are inferior, there must be something wrong with us. Then it must be so, because the Lord Buddha cannot be confused.”⁶⁹ This quote is especially interesting for a number of reasons. There are very few, if any, places in the Buddhist canon where the Buddha explicitly claims the inferiority of women. For this nun to accept women’s inferiority as a religious tenet rather than a social reality raises a number of questions. Has this nun been taught that the Buddha proclaimed all women are inferior? Has she inferred this notion after studying texts that indirectly assume the inferiority of women? This nun draws on her experiences in Buddhist study and Himalayan society to infer that women are inferior.

In an institutional context, both lay and monastic, it is difficult to deny the realities of gender inequality in the practice of Buddhism. While some of Havnevik’s informants acknowledged the possibility of enlightenment as a female, an overwhelming majority noted the difficulties a female practitioner encounters. One lay woman explained that it is

⁶⁸ Gutschow, 138.

⁶⁹ Havnevik, 164.

dangerous for women to stay alone in hermitages in remote places and in the mountains.⁷⁰ She also acknowledged childbirth as a serious obstacle for laywomen to overcome in their Buddhist practice. Moreover, Kim Gutschow argues that most of her male informants believe women are afflicted by “the three poisons of the mind,” which are desire, hatred, and ignorance.⁷¹ The understanding that the mental faculties of women are lesser than those of men was echoed by a number of my informants. The overwhelming amount of adverse social factors faced by women leads many to believe that their female birth is the result of negative karmic fruits.

A female rebirth takes on new meaning when examined in terms of female monasticism. In her research, Gutschow found nuns to “perform their asceticism assiduously, because they believe the female body to be a lower rebirth.”⁷² While it may be argued that all monastics aim to work diligently at monasticism, Gutschow argues that nuns must work even harder than the monks do, because of their additional karmic burdens. Daily prayers, prostrations, and other religious activities around the nunnery are performed to purify negative *karma* by attaining merits. The ultimate goal, however, is to develop a mind of compassion and enlightenment. While these nuns have accepted their fate as female practitioners in this lifetime, most of them are working towards a higher rebirth in their next lives, mainly that of a monk.

Gutschow states that every nun out of more than one hundred interviewed expressed their wish to be born a monk in their next lifetime. The desire to be reborn as a monk, shared by many nuns and lay women alike, is fueled by the reality of Himalayan Buddhist social

⁷⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁷¹ Gutschow, 165.

⁷² Ibid., 219.

structure: “monks sit at the apex of the social, moral, and political hierarchy.”⁷³ Gutschow argues that no matter how devoted or diligent a nun may be in her monasticism, her social status and access to education and training will always be secondary to that of a monk. Although a number of the nuns I interviewed at Dolma Ling believe that being born a woman is a lower birth, none of them cited their gender as a cause for their monasticism. However, when asked if they would like to be reborn as monks, most of the nuns responded affirmatively. The nuns at Dolma Ling have clearly formulated, although occasionally contradictory, beliefs about the hierarchy of rebirth and the suffering of women.

Ani Tenzin Yetga thinks that women are inherently more social than men, and are easily distracted from their studies by gossip or other inconsequential activities. She sees the triviality of women’s minds as a major cause of their greater *samsara*. Moreover, other nuns think that women’s bodies are linked to *samsara* because of social disadvantages and negative corporeal experience. Sherab Sangmo believes that women are a lower birth because of the problems women face with their health and body: “The women has many problem, more problem than mans. In *samsara* all humankind have problem, but more the women.” When asked about examples of the *samsara* of women, Sherab Sangmo told me that women have more diseases than men and must also go through childbirth.

Ani Karma Tsomo thinks that the reality of the female sex is that women have more ignorance and suffering than men.⁷⁴ Moreover, she explained to me that by attributing the *samsara* inherent in womanhood to *karma*, it is more easily reconcilable. She elucidates, “Whenever something bad things happening to me, I think that I committed bad [deeds] the

⁷³ Ibid., 164.

⁷⁴ It is important to distinguish here between the scholar and fully ordained Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Karma Tsomo, a nun from Dolma Ling whose interview is cited here and in the proceeding chapters.

result is happening now. If you think this you become peaceful. If you do think like this I think you don't have many problems" (Karma Tsomo). The doctrine of *karma* helps Karma Tsomo to feel at peace with any afflictions or troubles in her life and to continue working to counteract *samsara* with the practice of Buddhism.

A number of other nuns at Dolma Ling interpret the suffering of womanhood as *karma*. Kelsang Lhamo explains, "When the woman born, maybe we have done something wrong, that's why we are born a woman." However, Kelsang Lhamo notes that while a female rebirth is lower, it is not necessarily of lesser value, and therefore neither good nor bad. For instance, Kelsang Lhamo feels especially lucky to be a nun, because she has the amazing opportunity to dedicate her life to study. Agreeing with Kelsang Lhamo, Tenzin Droma, believes that *karma* has determined that women should have more suffering, but she thinks is a fact that we cannot or should not try to change. While there are some aspects of womanhood Tenzin Droma believes will inevitably lead to suffering, such as menstruation, by being a nun she is actively trying to minimize the burden of *samsara* on her life. For some nuns, understanding the gendered hierarchy that often prescribes women's inferiority in terms of *karma* allows them to acknowledge the cause of women's suffering, but also work to counteract it.

On the other hand, many of the nuns I interviewed do not believe in the gendered hierarchy of rebirth. Champa Dechen believes that "women have much wisdom and are very good." She explained to me the ways in which women have accomplished great things in this world. Champa Dechen thinks that being a woman is not lower than being a man, because women simply have different strengths than men. Tenzin Choedon also rejects the notion of a low birth, but thinks that some people might attribute women's suffering and

lower birth to menstruation and childbirth. However, she very clearly dismissed such views joking, “Maybe the boys take this one [pregnancy], then he is also become the lower! Then he is lower than the womans! It is not true.” For nuns like Tenzin Choedon, claims about women’s inferiority based on their reproductive functions are unfounded. Unlike the nun interviewed by Hanna Havnevik, Tenzin Choedon told me she has not yet found any justification in Buddhist scripture for such beliefs. While some of the nuns at Dolma Ling reject the notion of women as lower rebirths, they do recognize the hardships and disadvantages of being a woman in Tibetan society.

Tenzin Choeni believes that one’s status often depends on the society in which one lives, and that being born a woman is only a lower birth when being female impairs one’s freedom and social standing in society.

I think, well I can’t say that taking body as woman is a less advantage as taking as a man, but it’s up to the society where you were born and how much the society outlooks on the woman and the situation where you were born... If you are born in a male-dominated societies like sixties and fifty then you say, ‘Okay [it is] lower birth, because women [are] placed in kitchen all the time.’

Personally, Tenzin Choeni does not feel that she occupies a lower position in society. Although she experiences some disadvantages based on gender, as a nun Tenzin Choeni feels she is privileged to dedicate her life to learning Buddhism and philosophy: “I am born woman and I think I am better than many men in this world... I think I have a better life.” By acknowledging practical differences and situational disadvantages to being a woman in Tibetan society, Tenzin Choeni explains how many women and nuns come to see themselves as lower births. She masterfully explains how culturally determined gender roles inform Buddhist understandings of both the hierarchy of rebirth and *samsara*.

III. Descendents of the Ogress: The Female Body and its Impurity

One window into understanding Tibetan beliefs about gender roles and the female body is through the examination of the Tibetan creation story. The widely accepted creation myth of Tibet tells of a male ape, a student of Buddhism, who goes to Tibet in order to meditate. While in Tibet he is tempted by a “passionate ogress” and copulates with her as an act of compassion. It is noted that the ogress is an ogress rather than a woman or female ape because of her storehouse of negative *karma* from previous lives. After the two copulate they produce six offspring, who are believed to be the first Tibetans.⁷⁵ This story, if read as indicative of Tibetan gender and sex roles, is significant in that it sets forth a stark dichotomy. The ogress represents a stereotyped woman, who is lustful and aggressive with a dangerous sexuality, whereas the ape is seen as a victim of the passions of the ogress, and remains composed, rational, and compassionate in nature. The Tibetan understanding of women as temptresses of men, especially of monks, is still alive today.

Another early Tibetan cultural myth centers on the founding of Tibet as a religious nation. This story echoes similar sentiments about the nature of women. It discusses the natural landscape of Tibet as a “wild demoness (*srin mo*)” who was eventually tamed by Buddhist saints such as Padmasambhava.⁷⁶ Although this myth sets up slightly different gender roles, its imagery upholds Tibetan understandings of female nature as unruly and potentially dangerous. It is fascinating that in both of these myths that the male character is Buddhist or Bön, while the female character is depicted as wild and not religious. This sets up a dichotomy in which men are presented as rational beings predisposed for Buddhism,

⁷⁵ Havnevik, 145-6.

⁷⁶ Gutschow, 205.

while women are seen as unruly and must struggle to tame their bodies and minds in order to practice Buddhism.

It is through this religio-cultural backdrop that we must examine women, nuns, and the pollution of the female body. From traditional understandings of women as overly sexed one can infer that the female is aligned with a number of similar dualisms, such as impure rather than pure, polluted rather than clean, embodied rather than rational, and represents nature rather than culture or religion. Because of women's reproductive functions, they are associated with the embodied and the natural. Moreover, as Gutschow argues, female sex is "used to support a 'natural' and inevitable hierarchy of male over female, pure over impure."⁷⁷ As such, a woman's body can always be seen as inferior in the hierarchies of gender and purity.

It is pertinent to examine Tibetan cultural and religious understandings of pollution, especially as they relate to the female body. In *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns*, Hanna Havnevik quotes an early Mahāyāna text, the *Strivivartasutra*, which discusses the female body: "A woman should look upon her body as full of faults... This body is a vessel of impurity, full of stinking filth. It is like a rotten pit... This body is an assemblage of pain and suffering."⁷⁸ While Havnevik mentions that negative attitudes about the body apply to both men and women, the pollution of the female body is certainly seen as greater than that of the male body. All humans should realize the impermanence of their bodies, but it is women who most often come to view their bodies as polluted and shameful. It is also interesting to examine the accepted inferiority and pollution of the female body in light of major Buddhist

⁷⁷ Ibid., 329.

⁷⁸ Havnevik, 27-8.

doctrines such as non-duality that emphasize the impermanence of gender and sex distinctions.

Regardless of the Buddhist metaphysical understandings of impermanence, the hierarchy of purity exists in concrete form within Tibetan society. Monks are considered more pure than nuns, and nuns are more pure than lay women. Inextricable from the hierarchy of purity is an underlying belief in the inferiority of the female body. Gutschow explains how the hierarchy of purity supports other social and religious hierarchies. Moreover, the asymmetry of purity between the sexes is fundamental to the structures of Tibetan society. If women's bodies were seen as equal to men's bodies then the gendered hierarchy of the Tibetan monastic and social systems would collapse.

Gutschow notes that in Zangskari idiom, which is closely related to Tibetan, women are those “having miserable bodies (*lus ngan pa can*)”.⁷⁹ These beliefs about women's bodies are inextricably linked to women's reproductive functions. In Tibetan, the phrase used for menstruation, *lus zhigs byes*, means literally “body breaking down.” Gutschow explains that women's ability to bear children and menstruate is the root for the “stigma of impurity” surrounding women's bodies.⁸⁰ The bodily impurity of women has a direct impact on their participation in Tibetan religious and cultural life. The pollution of female bodies has also been the cause of a number of restrictions of female participation in Buddhist rituals and space, as menstruating women are often barred from sacred places such as holy wellsprings or waterfalls. Moreover, there are a select number of Tibetan Buddhist sites which forbid women altogether.

⁷⁹ Gutschow, 303.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 209.

Understandings about the innate impurity of the female body have also been internalized by many Tibetan women and nuns. One nun interviewed by Gutschow explained “Women’s bodies are distasteful and give off a bad smell... they shouldn’t enter divine places.”⁸¹ While many Tibetan men and women view the female body as a contaminant toxic to sacred spaces there are no such views preventing menstruating women from participating in the domestic sphere. This is most likely because women are needed in the mundane space of the home; their presence there is essential to the everyday functioning of the household.

Furthermore, even after the rejection of domestic roles symbolized by renunciation and ordination, a nun cannot escape the reality of her female body. Nuns at Dolma Ling hold a variety of beliefs about the female body and its importance or irrelevance in their spiritual progress, which will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. Historically in a Tibetan Buddhist context, the female body has been viewed as problematic, impure from childbearing and menstruation, embodying oversexed desire, and connected with *samsara* and cyclical existence. In *An Economy of Merit*, Gutschow explains that in Mahāyāna literature female sexuality often corresponds with corporeality and characteristics such as impurity and weakness, whereas male sexuality is associated with the perfected mind and the transcendence of embodied experience. While the male is seen as the idealized practitioner, the female carries a host of disadvantages and afflictions. Viewed in this light, the female body embodies negative attachment and desire, and must be transcended and transformed through female monasticism.

The cleansing and purification of the female body is not necessarily as easy as the renunciation of lay life. As Gutschow argues, “the nun is fundamentally different from the

⁸¹ Gutschow, 295-6.

monk because she bears an innate impurity that cannot be cleansed... Nuns can no more erase their impurity than they can abandon their female bodies.”⁸² A nun’s womanhood can be renounced to a degree, but her impurity is inherent in her body, in her capacity to bear children and menstruate. While a monk’s body, both celibate and male, is innately pure, a nun’s body is unable to transform into monastic purity through celibacy. Though a nun performs the same monastic devotions as her male counterparts, her female body, flawed and impure, is a reminder that her monasticism will always be colored by her inferior gender and sex.

In the discussion of the pollution of the female body it is important to note that notions of purity and impurity are not inherent to the Buddhist doctrine, but rather are socially and culturally constructed within Tibetan society. While these conceptions have no doubt leaked into Buddhist understandings of gender, monasticism, and sacred place, they are not essential to the Buddhist canon. Constructing a hierarchy of purity in male and female bodies is not justifiable by Buddhist doctrine, because the dialectic of purity essentializes phenomena that Buddhism rejects as impermanent and immaterial. Therefore, conceptions of purity and pollution have been externally appropriated by Tibetan Buddhism to reconcile the gendered difference of male and female bodies within Buddhism.

Celibacy is an essential aspect of the experience of monasticism, which closely relates to the dialectic of purity. The goal of celibacy is to remove distractions and bodily pleasures from monastic life, redirecting energy towards spiritual and selfless matters. Moreover, the Tibetan phrase for celibacy, “*gtsang ma, tshangs ma,*” mean “pure, holy, celestial, or sanctified.”⁸³ Thus, the assumption is that celibacy purifies the earthly,

⁸² Ibid., 272.

⁸³ Ibid., 201.

embodied, and impure aspects of human sexuality for monasticism. However, even after a nun has renounced lay life, sex, and desire, beliefs about her prominent sexuality often persist. These beliefs about nuns' rampant sexuality are manifested most clearly in the Tibetan laity, which often gossips about nuns breaking their vows. In celibacy, a nun's sexuality may be seen as suppressed, but never transcended. Havnevik argues, quoting I.B. Horner:

'By the adoption of the life and wearing the robes of an Order, try she never so hard, woman cannot become unsexed either in herself or in the thoughts of men. She is still woman. In addition, the views concerning the status of women which had been held for centuries preceding the time of Gotama did not enable all his disciples to sustain his unprejudiced attitude towards them.'⁸⁴

Even though the performance of a nun's gender is self-consciously constructed as androgynous, her female body marks her essential and inescapable sexuality.

In "The Significance of Ordination as a Buddhist Nun," Ayya Khema portrays nunhood in a more positive light. She sees nunhood as successful in dispelling the age-old associations of women with the body, family, and sexuality. Khema believes that nuns are able to shed these stereotypes through their renunciation, allowing them to occupy a transformed space of gender as monastics. Khema emphasizes the significance of celibacy in this gendered transformation: "It [celibacy] is the ultimate rejection of life as a sex object. It becomes a symbol of independence from the type-casting that sees women only as adjuncts to men or as capable of nothing more worthwhile than partner relationships."⁸⁵ Here celibacy and the monastic lifestyle play a prominent role in the transformation of a nun's gender roles, because they clearly reject a woman's role as dependent on a husband or bound

⁸⁴ Havnevik, 127.

⁸⁵ Ayya Khema, "The Significance of Ordination as a Buddhist Nun," In *Daughters of the Buddha*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1988) 56.

to endless suffering. Most of the nuns at Dolma Ling were happy to discard such a future as a laywoman in place of myriad advantages they found in monastic life, which will be addressed in section V of this chapter.

It is important to note that while Gutschow's arguments accurately depict the gender hierarchy and gender troubles of nuns in Zangskar and Tibet, they paint a far grimmer picture than the one I encountered at Dolma Ling Nunnery. This may be due to temporal circumstances, differences in location, or simply differing opinions between nuns. While most of the nuns at Dolma Ling now receive a comparable education to their male peers and a relatively privileged status in Tibetan society, many of the nuns are aware that these opportunities are extremely recent. Most of the nuns at Dolma Ling have an acute awareness of the difficulties of their female predecessors in Tibet, understanding the struggles of being a nun, maintaining duties as a daughter, and withstanding societal pressures regarding their inferiority as monastics. Ani Tenzin Choeni explained, "It's a long time that society sees women as something like 'they can't do anything,' like this. Because [it is] a male dominated society." In exile, however, Tibetan beliefs about the gender and sexuality of nuns are beginning to change. The nuns were insightful and thoughtful about how they viewed their own bodies and gender, which will be discussed in depth in the fourth chapter of this thesis. Moreover, Tenzin Choeni's acute awareness of Tibetan views on gender was also mirrored by a number of other nuns I interviewed in their accounts of experiences as female monastics.

IV. Tibetan Householders' Perceptions of Nuns

Though the Buddha may have been a proponent of more equitable gender roles than had previously existed, we have seen the ways that beliefs about the inferiority of women

have continued to exist within Buddhist societies. In *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* Karma Lekshe Tsomo explains that Himalayan societies have traditionally been organized hierarchically, based on gender, wealth, class, education, and ordination status. She argues, “These societies make no pretense that their members are equal, but their social system is believed to be equitable, flexible, and efficacious, regardless of inequalities.”⁸⁶ Karma Lekshe Tsomo makes an interesting distinction here between equality and equity, noting that while all citizens may not be equal society treats them in a just manner.

She also claims that many Tibetan women have accepted a subservient role in the domestic sphere because of custom and tradition. It is possible that an awareness of the effectiveness of such a division of labor is what kept women satisfied with the gender hierarchy. Some scholars such as Hanna Havnevik have argued instead that Tibetan women have enjoyed a relatively privileged status within Tibetan society, as compared with women in other traditional Asian societies. The fact that scholars disagree about the status of women in Tibetan society indicates that gender roles in Tibetan society are complex and dynamic, which makes them difficult to essentialize. Moreover, in *The Tibetans*, Matthew Kapstein also explains that the sheer size of the Tibetan landscape is demonstrative of the overwhelming diversity of the Tibetan world, making it impossible to broadly generalize about women in “Tibetan society.”⁸⁷ Rather, Tibetan society has been egalitarian, oppressive, and also neutral to women within a variety of contexts, political climates, and time periods.

Traditionally, one specific way that gender inequality has manifested within Tibetan society is through religious opportunities, which are often informed by lay views on the

⁸⁶ Lekshe Tsomo, 175.

⁸⁷ Matthew Kapstein, “Tibetan Society,” *The Tibetans*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006) 199.

religious potential of women. Kim Gutschow argues that preconceptions about women's capabilities within the Tibetan laity often cause women to question their potential to become teachers, abbesses, or one day enlightened beings.⁸⁸ By making women feel insecure about their own abilities, lay views function as a potential self-fulfilling prophesy. Similarly, Ani Champa Dechen of Dolma Ling also notes that lay views often affect female practitioners. She explains, "Some say women [are] meant for housework. Others think [that] women can do anything... Some people think that women are very weak, and men are very brave." Here Champa Dechen describes the heterogeneous beliefs among the Tibetan laity. She has encountered some lay people who affirm the capabilities of female renunciants, while others are convinced that women are destined for domesticity.

While monasticism and serious religious dedication have been accepted for both men and women within Tibetan society, Tibetan women continue to encounter many obstacles to their personal religious practice. Almost all of the nuns I interviewed at Dolma Ling expressed the impossibility of seriously practicing Buddhism as a laywoman, and many of them cited this as the primary reason they decided to renounce lay life. Many of the nuns told accounts of their siblings, living in both Tibet and in exile, who are too busy working and raising children to take time to practice and study Buddhism.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues that women with strong religious convictions often feel obligated to meet their parents' expectations of marriage. She explains, "They are free to pursue religious practice at home, but social, marital, maternal, and household responsibilities leave little time and are potentially problematic."⁸⁹ Kim Gutschow notes that there is little room for women who would rather remain single, because of the great amount

⁸⁸ Gutschow, 245.

⁸⁹ Lekshe Tsomo, 174.

of societal pressure on women to get married. Because there has been a general lack of support for women's religious practice in the past, women have been forced either to marry and forgo serious Buddhist practice or renounce lay life altogether and dedicate their lives to Buddhism.

Moreover, women who are interested in Buddhism and take the novice vows are often encouraged to meditate at home as opposed to exploring the Buddhist scholastic and philosophical traditions more readily available to men. This is especially true in Tibet, where many novice nuns continue to live with their families while they pursued their spiritual aspirations, either out of obligation or a lack of resources. Furthermore, nuns have historically lacked the institutional support readily available to monks, which has often made life as a female renuciant a constant struggle for resources.⁹⁰ If women are able to partake in intensive practices in a hermitage or mountain retreat, they often are vulnerable to rape or sexual exploitation. Thus, even if women are given the chance to seriously dedicate themselves to the practice Buddhism, they encounter many factors that make intensive study and practice difficult, if not impossible.

While nuns have taken vows of celibacy their sexuality is still a subject of scrutiny and judgment among the Tibetan laity. Perhaps harking back to the ogress of the creation myth, nuns are often viewed as particularly lustful. Hanna Havnevik explains that views of Tibetan women as lustful and deceitful are rooted in both pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist elements that were adopted from Indian culture with the transmission of Buddhism.⁹¹ Moreover, one extremely disconcerting thought for many in the Tibetan laity is the potential for nuns to seduce monks, although these cases are very rare. Interestingly, this was also

⁹⁰ This topic will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3.

⁹¹ Havnevik, 146.

seen as a potential danger in allowing for the creation of the Order of nuns. This concern also points to the somewhat confusing notion of nuns as temptresses, when in reality they are most often the victims of the passions of laymen and monks. Hanna Havnevik cites a number of interviews with laywomen in which women depicted the nuns as lascivious and likely to break their vows, although informants claimed that nuns rarely disrobe. When asked about their scandalous gossip, lay people often referred Havnevik to the Akhu Thompa stories, which make fun of the passionate nature of nuns.⁹²

Regardless of the circumstances under which some nuns break their vows of celibacy, Kim Gutschow and Charlene Makley explain that there is still a tendency among Tibetan laity to joke and gossip about the loose morality of nuns. Gutschow argues that talk of nuns breaking their vows and getting pregnant is pervasive within Zangskari society. Perhaps this is because nuns, unlike monks, bear the physical evidence of their indiscretions, whether by choice or by force. Also interesting is that when questioned, most lay people could not name an instance when a nun broke her vows of celibacy. This further proves the point that most of the lay gossip about the nuns is unfounded in reality. In “Embodying the Sacred: Gender and Monastic Revitalization in China’s Tibet,” Charlene Makley argues that the scandalous, but hypothetical, gossip of Tibetan laity “re-sexed the nuns,” differentiating their oversexed behavior and loose morals from the pure motivations of monks.⁹³ Besides creating false stereotypes about the nuns, gossip among the laity functions to de-legitimize the genuine religious motivations of female monastics. Havnevik notes that historically nuns have been held more accountable for their actions than monks, and have learned to be more careful as a result. While nuns are more recently beginning to earn respect within Tibetan lay

⁹² Ibid., 147.

⁹³ Charlene Elizabeth Makley, “Embodying the Sacred: Gender and Monastic Revitalization in China’s Tibet,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1999) 230.

communities, they are still held to a double standard in regards to their sexuality. It was unclear, based on my experiences in Dharamsala and Dolma Ling, whether or not such views and gossip are still prevalent within the contemporary Tibetan laity in exile. Lay beliefs about the sexuality of nuns have also caused many Tibetans to doubt the motives of women who chose to renounce the lay life. Many scholars such as Gutschow argue that nuns have been met with suspicion since the original formation of the nun's Order. According to one laywoman interviewed by Havnevik, "There are some cases when women want to become nuns from their own wish. In most of the cases, however, the women who are ugly are put in the nunneries. Also, women who are mentally retarded are sent to nunneries. Then there are some cases where women who are fighting with their husbands run away to a nunnery."⁹⁴ However, it is important to note that not all of the Tibetan laity is suspicious of nuns' motives and capabilities, especially as nuns in exile prove themselves through achievement in higher education. Moreover, due to the intense amount of discipline and intellect required to attend a nunnery as rigorous as Dolma Ling, which will be discussed in the next chapter, such stereotypes of nuns are far from reality. The popular belief that women choose monasticism because they are somehow defective or incapable of functioning among the laity undermines the dedication of the nuns and the sincerity of their motivations. Most of the nuns I interviewed at Dolma Ling made a personal decision to renounce lay life that was firmly rooted in their rejection of the suffering of lay life and their dedication to Buddhist practice and study, which are the primary focus of the next section.

V. Reasons for Renunciation: Rejecting Life as a Householder and Bending Oneself Towards the Sacred

⁹⁴ Havnevik, 151.

*To cut the hair is to separate oneself from the previous world; to dedicate the hair is to bend oneself to the sacred world.*⁹⁵

In *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*, Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues that the advantages of monastic life are most apparent for lay women, who are most caught in the entanglements of family obligations in the mundane sphere. She explains that the monastery, for many women, represents a safe space from worldly concerns. In the previous sections of this chapter we have seen the ways in which Tibetan women's lives may be seen as representative of *samsara*. Moreover, for the majority of the nuns at Dolma Ling, a rejection of the suffering of lay life was the primary reason they chose to renounce. Karma Tsomo clearly stated the position of many of the nuns at Dolma Ling when she said, "I don't [have an] interest in *samsara*, you know. In laymen's life there is lots of suffering. So that's why I think if you become a nun and study Buddhism we can be free from the suffering." Moreover, Gutschow's ethnography of Zangskari nuns echoes similar sentiments of the nuns' wholehearted rejection of lay life.

As a little girl, Ani Champa Dechen knew that she wanted to be free from the housework and domesticity that she saw all around her. She explained that she desperately wanted to escape marriage and life as a householder, and dreaded that she might end up like her mother. Instead Champa Dechen admires monks and nuns, as she explained to me: "high thinking and simple living is good." Tenzin Choedon was also very clear that she never wanted to marry: "I think the marriage is not to enjoy life." When asked for reasons why, she explained that married life is extremely busy, her husband might be bad or beat her, and she might be so caught up in her life that she may never have a chance to help other people. Similarly, Ani Tenzin Droma also told me that life as a layperson is busy and unhappy. She

⁹⁵ Kim Gutschow, 177.

was very clear in her expressing her distaste of lay life. “I don’t like marriage and child; I never liked... Only nuns I like very much.” She also saw the hectic nature of lay life as incongruent with her interests in studying. Hanna Havnevik also notes that a number of her nun informants saw lay life as an obstacle to their religious aspirations.

Of all the nuns I spoke to, not a single one ever mentioned having wanted to be married or have children. Few of them expressed feeling initially ambivalent about taking the vows of celibacy, giving up alcohol, shaving their heads, or renouncing any other ostensible “perks” of lay life. The sureness with which they wholeheartedly rejected life as a laywoman is striking and fascinating. What experiences led these nuns to renounce lay life with such indubitable certainty? I found myself wishing that I could feel so sure about anything at such a young age, let alone such a permanent and serious decision such as monasticism. When I probed further asking the nuns to explore what they saw as the negative aspects of lay life, many of them shared personal anecdotes of their siblings and family members.

Tenzin Droma contrasted her two unhappy and codependent married sisters with her two happy and well educated brothers who are monks. Ani Karma Tsomo explained that she has seen overwhelming suffering in the world, especially in lay life. “I found my father and mother you know they are always argue... So that is why I find no interest [in *samsara*].” Growing up amongst parents who fought exposed Karma Tsomo to the difficulties and suffering of married life, so she made it her life’s work to become liberated from *samsara* through Buddhism.

Kelsang Lhamo remembered growing up around her uncles who were monks, and recalled how they were always happy and how “they have not tension or something else. So I

become a nun.” When asked whether or not she thinks her two married sisters are happy she responded with a decided “no.” She explained, “They have so many tension, they always fight with each other... Seeing this problems I am thinking that maybe I have done so good [to become nun].” After comparing her life with her relatives, Kelsang Lhamo was very sure that she made the right decision in renouncing lay life.

Tenzin Choedon also reminisced about seeing her uncle who is a monk: “I think when I look these robes it is very nice. Every day he read scripture and meditate and I think, oh! This chance is very nice. I think that and I became a nun. Now many years [later] I think oh, it is very right.” For both Tenzin Choedon and Kelsang Lhamo having a monastic relative to model the monastic way of life was integral to their decision to become nuns. The nuns were also clear in showing that the reverse is true. Tenzin Choedon discussed her married sister who lives in Tibet: “My elder sister, she is nomad. Everyday she going out to the yaks and [doing] lots of work... very busy with only their life.” She echoed the sentiments of the other nuns in stating that her siblings were not happy, because the business of lay life prevents them from practicing Buddhism. She also explained that lay people have more tension and suffering because they do not have the life perspective available through Buddhist monasticism. By contrast, Tenzin Choedon discussed her own happiness as a monastic: “I think the nuns and monks [get] good chance for the meditate about Buddhisms. More thinking and more their studies, I think.” Tenzin Choedon believes that by dedicating one’s life to meditation and the study of Buddhism, one can become happy and also be in a position to help others.

Once a nun rejects the suffering of lay life and takes her novice vows, she may not be able to fully escape the mundane sphere of the householder life. In “Yeshe’s Tibetan

Pilgrimage,” Kim Gutschow explains the difficulties of nuns who remain at home after renunciation. She sees these nuns as caught between the esoteric and mundane worlds, pushed and pulled between the nunnery and household.⁹⁶ Moreover, Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues, “Although nuns have ‘renounced’ (*rab.byung*), meaning ‘left the household life,’ their status as nuns does not free them from the obligations to their natal families.”⁹⁷ Because these nuns are still daughters living at home, they are often required to perform daily chores and have little time to dedicate to their Buddhist practices. Even if they have the time, these nuns may not have the resources or an environment conducive to serious study and practice. Both Kim Gutschow and Karma Lekshe Tsomo found that nuns often have difficulty balancing lay and monastic duties.

While there are a significant number of nuns who do live at home after renunciation, either out of familial obligations or lack of funds, these nuns tend to be village nuns and are usually from Tibet or remote Himalayan regions. Currently, nuns in exile are beginning to have resources more readily available to them, which make it more possible for them to leave home for a nunnery such as Dolma Ling. Of the nine nuns I interviewed, only two of them mentioned experiencing difficulties balancing domestic work and religious practice while living as a nun at home. Tsering Yangpal, who became a nun at nine years old while living in Kham, Tibet, spent eight years living at home before moving to India to attend Dolma Ling Nunnery in 1998. This may be, in part, because she was only nine at the time of renunciation, and so could not make the long and arduous journey over the Himalayas by foot. Regardless of the precise reason, Tsering Yangpal spent a significant amount of time

⁹⁶ Kim Gutschow, “Yeshe’s Tibetan Pilgrimage and the Founding of a Himalayan Nunnery,” In *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*, (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000) 224.

⁹⁷ Lekshe Tsomo, 177-8.

living as a nun at home. Recalling this time in her fledgling monastic career, Tsering Yangpal remembered that she had very little time to study Buddhism.

I did [a] lot of work. Sometimes I make cooking and [worked with] field animals. And sometimes I make *tsampa* and lots of works different, so many different... No, I didn't get time to for study. I have lots of working in my home and I haven't any teacher and I haven't no nunnery. So, therefore, I don't got to chance [to] study, no study.

As a young nun, Tsering Yangpal had little time and even fewer resources to assist in her practice of Buddhism. She explained that finally after ten years at Dolma Ling she is extremely happy living and studying at the nunnery: "It's so good and I am so lucky."

Tenzin Choeni also noted that she still feels pressure from her family to re-enter household life when she returns home for short visits. She explained that her family will often ask her to help with household chores, even though she is nun. Because of the pressure from her family to do chores and housework while she is home, Tenzin Choeni sometimes feels the need to remind her family that she is a nun. She also explained that this is a primary reason she rarely chooses to go home to visit. She views life at home as an ineffective, inappropriate atmosphere to practice Buddhism as a monastic:

To study Buddhist Philosophy you need to have a conducive atmosphere to study. And you stay in home and your parents say do this do that, you can't get a lot of time. Many distractions. Because studying Buddhist philosophy is not just restricted only to knowledge. You have to practice. For that you need a lot of time, right? With lot of distractions, you can't do it!

Tenzin Choeni saw the distractions and responsibilities of living as a householder, or even as a nun in the household, as too difficult and counterproductive to the study of Buddhism.

For most young Tibetan nuns, especially in exile, the act of renunciation symbolizes the starting of a new life and freedom from the household obligations that are seen as linked to *samsara*. While almost every nun I spoke with discusses the rejection of lay life and

suffering as a reason for renunciation, or their “push factor,” many of them also spoke of Buddhism and education as their “pull factors.” Karma Lekshe Tsomo affirms that while many nuns reject the suffering of lay life they have witnessed, that the majority of Tibetan nuns choose monasticism out of sincere desires to practice Buddhism, which they see as the most valuable use of a human life.⁹⁸ Gutschow also echoes these sentiments in her ethnography, explaining that given the rarity of a human birth it would be a shame not to dedicate one’s life to Buddhism. Moreover, Karma Lekshe Tsomo notes that choosing the path of nunhood out of a rejection of suffering is a legitimate motivation, as understanding the suffering of life is fundamental to Buddhism.⁹⁹

Many of the nuns I interviewed have been interested in Buddhism from an early age. Tenzin Yetga explained to me her childhood experiences with Buddhism: “In the childhood I am interested in just Buddhism. Often I went to just listen [to] the teachings of the lamas and just study about Buddhism... [I] was religious and just like prostrating and circumambulating.” She noted that when she was first interested in Buddhism, she was not aware of the more complex Buddhist philosophies and higher practices. She remembered, “I just only see the nuns and monks are only to recite in the monastery or all these things. Then I am interested to become a nun and do something for the next life or this life, to [do] good things.” From an early age Tibetan monks and nuns made an impression on her and inspired her desires to do good deeds. Once she became a nun Tenzin Yetga became aware of and appreciated the deeper meanings of the Buddhist tradition. Karma Tsomo had somewhat similar motivations, which she described very succinctly: “I became *ani* to learn the tradition and to be free from *samsara*.” Of all the nuns I interviewed, Karma Tsomo was the most

⁹⁸ Ibid., 180.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 345.

outspoken about her desires to be free from suffering. Like Karma Tsomo, Kelsang Lhamo also became a nun out of a rejection for lay life. She explained that initially she was not motivated by a desire for education, but now she loves the education she receives at Dolma Ling, especially her classes on English, which is her favorite subject.

Sherab Sangmo, on the other hand, was inspired solely on the basis of her dedication to Buddhism: “I thought that I if I become nun, I will get more time to practice in Buddhism... Because if I didn’t become *ani*, I [wouldn’t] get opportunity to learn Buddhism. If I get married there is no time for to learn Buddhism.” Sherab Sangmo is yet another nun to articulate the difficulties of practicing Buddhism as a layperson. Moreover, Tenzin Choeni expressed her desire to spend her entire life seriously studying Buddhism: “I thought that becoming a nun and studying Buddhist philosophy [has] a lot of advantages, because you can spend a whole lot of time in your studies. You are free now. If you are a woman, if you are not ordained, you have to take care of all lot of things and you hardly get the time to take seriously study Buddhist Philosophy.” All of the nuns at Dolma Ling seem to be in agreement about the incompatibility of lay life with the serious practice and study of Buddhism.

Of the nine nuns I interviewed, only Tsering Yangpal’s parents decided for her to become a nun. She explained that her parents thought it would be a good decision for her: “When I became nun I am so young. My parents they are said, ‘You become nun. So, nun’s life is so good for yourself.’ Therefore, they make me nun.” When I asked why her parents chose to have their only daughter become a nun she elucidated, “Because I got more chance to learn study and practice about Buddhism.” However, because she became a nun at age nine, Tsering Yangpal spent another eight years at home before entering Dolma Ling. She

recalled that she was very happy to finally go to the nunnery to really study Buddhism: “I think just now I am so lucky, because I got good chance to study and I got big experience about modern society.” For Tsering Yangpal, attending Dolma Ling was radically different from her life as a nun at home, but she explained that now she is very dedicated to her studies.



Dolma Ling Nunnery. Photograph taken by author.

The majority of the nuns I interviewed, both from Tibet and surrounding areas in India, decided for themselves to become nuns in their teens and usually with the support of their parents. Tenzin Yetga and Tenzin Choeni, are two nuns who became monastics later in life. Tenzin Yetga explained to me that she was never interested in marriage, and put off her parents request for her marriage by working as a typist in Ladakh for a number of years. Finally, at age twenty seven, she recalls: “They said, ‘Now you have a job, now you have

marriage,' but I said no, no, now I will become a nun." Tenzin Yetga explained that she had been interested in Buddhism for many years prior, but was not completely sure until later that she wanted to become a nun.

Initially from Ladakh, Tenzin Choeni attended Delhi University and graduated with a degree in Commerce. Also the only nun I met at Dolma Ling who had received a formal higher education, Tenzin Choeni had a sincere and devout passion for Buddhist philosophy. She explained, "For two years I had studied Buddhist philosophy, not being ordained, being a woman, a girl. When I was in school I had a very strong interest to study Buddhist philosophy... After finishing my graduation I decided to study Buddhist philosophy." After a number of years studying Buddhist philosophy independently, Tenzin Choeni finally decided to become a nun at age twenty five. She also noted that part of the reason she waited to become a nun is because her father wanted her to think the decision over so that she knew for certain it was the right choice. Now Tenzin Choeni is absolutely certain that she made the right choice, and her joy at being a nun radiates from her as she discusses Buddhist philosophy. Once a nun has decided to renounce life as a householder, she must undergo a series of changes.

The experience of becoming a nun is extremely transformative externally, as one changes physically, and internally, through the transformation of one's identity and worldview. In Kim Gutschow's *An Economy of Merit*, Zangskari nun Drolma elucidates the ways in which renunciation and non-attachment are symbolically enacted as lived praxis in the corporeality of Tibetan nuns:

*I saw the endless wheel of Samsara,
To be enmeshed in delusion,
Is nothing but endless suffering.
I turned my back on all that.*

*When the lama shaved my head,
He cut the ties of worldly sorrow...*¹⁰⁰

Through the renunciation of the suffering of life as a householder, Drolma cuts her hair, taking the first physical step in removing herself from the sphere of womanhood and “worldly sorrow.” Cutting of one’s hair symbolically removes one from the realm of the laity and simultaneously affirms one’s new role as a monastic. Similarly, Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues that the decision to shave the head is symbolic of a rejection of familial roles and an assertion of a new religious identity as a monastic.

Moreover, all of the nuns at Dolma Ling spoke very positively about the embodied change to monasticism. When I asked Tenzin Choedon whether or not she enjoys shaving her head and wearing robes she explained to me, “It is good. I think the Lord Buddha made [it] very suitable. No hairs. If I give hair it has many work. To wash, there are many works. Therefore the time is waste, I think.” Tenzin Choedon emphasized the practical benefits of having a shaved head and wearing the same robes every day, which she has found are very conducive to maximizing time for religious practice.

Tenzin Choeni is also extremely fond of the monastic dress and hairstyle. She elucidated, “I don’t have to worry about what hairstyle, to dye my hair, what clothes, which are in fashion, and all... I don’t have to [think] if I wear these clothes the boys will like it... I don’t have to care all about this. I just have to care, okay, I want to just change my outlook.” She explained to me that shaving her head and wearing robes not only saved time, but also helped her mentally to stay focused in her religious discipline. Instead of being obsessed with her appearance, she is able to concentrate on her pursuit of knowledge and greater understanding. Also, Tenzin Choeni recognized that the less energy and time she

¹⁰⁰ Gutschow, 196.

spent on her physical appearance, the less attachment she felt to her corporeal form. Furthermore, Ani Tenzin Yetga of Dolma Ling speaks very eloquently on the subject. She thinks of the bodily transformation to monasticism, “You know, actually all this physical, outside things are changed. As the same as inside I also changed my heart not to attach with this outside looks. The most important [thing] is to change our heart and control our mind.” Tenzin Yetga elucidates precisely the parallels between the exterior and interior transformations that accompany renunciation.

In this chapter I have attempted to explore the various Tibetan lay views on the suffering and impurity of womanhood that both inform attitudes towards women and nuns and prompt nuns to “cut the ties of worldly sorrow” and renounce the lay life. Nuns at Dolma Ling have witnessed and experienced the suffering of lay life and have chosen instead to dedicate themselves to monastic discipline and study. Once a nun rejects the lay life and takes up the monastic robes, she becomes part of an extremely large and complex network of Tibetan monastic institutions. We now turn to the next chapter of this thesis, which takes issue with the monastic gender hierarchy and how it informs the opportunities and education available to Tibetan nuns.

Chapter 3. Experiences of Monasticism and the Nuns of Dolma Ling

I. Existence within the Monastic Gender Hierarchy

The monastic hierarchy is one of the most concrete manifestations of gender hierarchy in Tibetan society. While in the lay sphere of society gender roles and status are relatively fluid in that women have significant status and power within the informal sectors of society, the monastic gender hierarchy, at least traditionally, has been more explicit about the subordination of female monastics to monks. It is one of the very concrete ways in which gender dualities are manifested as real and substantial, even if the Buddhist doctrine teaches that these concepts are constructed and illusory on an ultimate level. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the gender hierarchy of monasticism fits into the systematic hierarchy of rebirth. The *karma* of nunhood is considered greater than that of laypeople, both male and female, but lesser than the *karma* of monkhood.¹⁰¹ While nuns, as monastics, sit higher on the karmic rungs of rebirth than laymen and women, they remain below their male counterparts.

In *An Economy of Merit*, Kim Gutschow argues that since its creation, the order of nuns has been constrained by social beliefs in the inferiority of female celibacy. She elucidates, “The culture of Buddhist monasticism maintains sexual difference and hierarchy.”¹⁰² She believes that if nuns were able to truly renounce their female gender and exist on the same androgynous level as monks, they would be considered as transcending the gender hierarchy that has existed for centuries within Tibetan society. Gutschow explains that for nuns to transcend the Tibetan gender hierarchy would imply that monasticism is threatening the structures of the society on which it depends. Therefore, despite the Buddhist

¹⁰¹ Lekshe Tsomo, 182.

¹⁰² Gutschow, 224.

doctrine's non-discriminatory nature, the orders of monks and nuns must continue to be defined by distinct gender difference.

Because of nuns' inferior karmic status and their desire to improve their status through the accumulation of merit, Gutschow argues that nuns have an interest in serving their karmic superiors. Serving monks, who symbolize "the greatest field of merit," earns a nun the maximum amount of merit possible, far succeeding amounts earned in service of a lay household. Moreover, these subservient roles feed into the monastic gender hierarchy by promoting the dependency of nuns and nunneries on monks. Hanna Havnevik also speaks to the dangers of the wholehearted deference of nuns to monks regardless of age. She explains that while it is positive in that it fosters respect and politeness within the monastic community, it is negative in that it is rarely reciprocal. This is mostly due to the Eight Heavy Rules, which make prostrations to monks compulsory for nuns, but not for monks to nuns. Also, Havnevik argues that exceeding deference to monks may serve to "erode the confidence of the nuns," and cause nuns to doubt their value as second-class monastics.¹⁰³ Gutschow cites examples such as the tradition of seating the entire assembly of monks above that of the nuns as affirming a general understanding that monks are superior to nuns.

Moreover, in this example Kim Gutschow also argues the impossibility of androgyny for Tibetan nun. If monastic androgyny were to exist, it might be viewed as a signifier of gender equality within Tibetan Buddhism, as a deconstruction of the gender stratification currently present. However, Gutschow believes that nuns are acutely aware of their "feminine status" every time they are forced to prostrate before novice monks.¹⁰⁴ While it is certainly problematic that the prostrations are not reciprocal, which indicates a lack of

¹⁰³ Havnevik, 160-1.

¹⁰⁴ Gutschow, 249.

respect for the nuns, Gutschow oversimplifies the complex ways that Tibetan nuns and monks interact within the monastic hierarchy. Tibetan nuns may be aware of their “feminine status” within the monastic hierarchy, but their status is not static or essentially inferior in nature. Rather, there are structures in place that subordinate nuns based on centuries-old views of women as less capable spiritual practitioners. In that Gutschow argues the need for a refiguring of patriarchal Buddhist structures, I am most certainly in agreement. That being said, there are a number of ways that Tibetan nuns, like Tibetan laywomen, have informal power and status. Havnevik explains that by depicting Tibetan women as having high or low status one fails to recognize the ways that women’s status varies within different spheres of behavior. Therefore, when discussing the status of Tibetan nuns one must recognize that their status is fluid rather than stagnant, and has rapidly changed within the last twenty years as nuns gain access to higher education, which I will discuss in the following section.

There are many different Tibetan terms for the word “nun.” Because Tibetan nuns have never existed as fully ordained *bhiksuni*s, which will be discussed in the subsequent section of this chapter, most Tibetan nuns are officially novices, even if they have been a nun for many years. There are many Tibetan terms for “nun,” such as *ani*, *jomo*, *gema*, *tsunma*, and *chöla*. Scholars differ on their opinions as to which terms are considered more respectful than others. In my experience, the Tibetan term *ani* is used widely, throughout Dharamsala and at Dolma Ling, to denote a nun. Because the term *ani* literally means “aunt” in Tibetan, scholars such as Hanna Havnevik and Karma Lekshe Tsomo have argued that it is impolite.¹⁰⁵ However, none of my informants seemed to hold such views and encouraged my use of the word. The discourse over terminology and respect for nuns plays into the larger discourse of full ordination of nuns, which will also be discussed in the next section.

¹⁰⁵ Havnevik, 44.

The lack of full ordination for a Tibetan nun is one way in which her upward mobility within the monastic hierarchy is severely limited, in contrast with a monk's potential to be fully ordained. However, while official monastic policy only allows a nun to take novice ordination, some nuns abide by the precepts of full ordination unofficially. This is another way in which Tibetan nuns informally demonstrate their agency within the monastic hierarchy.

Moreover, because nuns wear monastic robes, do religious work that earns merits, and have renounced the householder life, they have earned a fundamental level of respect from the Tibetan laity. However, within the monastic hierarchy there are many important opportunities and positions closed to nuns, who compete with monks within a shared religious structure, where the rules most often favor monks over nuns. Hanna Havnevik elucidates, "Monks monopolize formal lay and ecclesiastic positions, leaving nuns to make their presence felt through informal channels."¹⁰⁶ It is those who sit at the apex of the gender hierarchy, the monks and men, who dominate the leadership of both the lay and religious sectors, leaving nuns and women to earn their status through informal avenues of society.

While the informal power and status of Tibetan nuns is substantial, having grown significantly in the past twenty years, it is also pertinent to underscore this growth with a brief overview of the Eight Heavy Rules, which have historically affected the status of Tibetan nuns. In *An Economy of Merit*, Kim Gutschow argues, "While its [Buddhism's] monastic tradition is open to both sexes, the female path of renunciation has always been constrained, defined, and limited by male colleagues."¹⁰⁷ The most explicit example of this

¹⁰⁶ Havnevik, 140.

¹⁰⁷ Gutschow, 310.

vertical relationship between monks and nuns is in the “Eight Weighty Precepts” (Tibetan: *lci ba’I chos brgyad*) or “Eight Heavy Rules” (Pali: *gurudhamma*).

The Eight Heavy Rules date back to Sakyamuni Buddha’s aunt Mahapajapati and the foundation of the Order of nuns, which I discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. These rules were accepted by Mahapajapati as the conditions for the existence of the Order of Buddhist nuns. In “One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-excluded Middle,” Janet Gyatso explores the intersection of gender and Buddhist monasticism. Considering the Eight Heavy Rules she argues, “The Eight Heavy Rules legislate that all nuns must defer to all monks and accept them as their ritual and authoritative superiors, no matter what the discrepancies in seniority or merit.”¹⁰⁸ While the order and wording of the rules may vary slightly between Buddhist schools, the overall message is clear: the Eight Chief Rules define the Order of nuns as dependent on the Order of monks. The rules as seen below are taken from Kim Gutschow’s *Being a Buddhist Nun* and have been translated from Tibetan by Jamgön Kongtrul in *Buddhist Ethics*:

1. Nuns must receive ordination from monks.
2. Nuns must receive an announcement from monks about the proper date for the fortnightly confession and recitation of their monastic discipline.
3. Nuns must only undertake rainy season retreats under the supervision of monks.
4. Nuns must attend a ceremonial confession following the rainy season together with monks.
5. Nuns must perform penance before both assemblies of monks and nuns for any transgressions.
6. Nuns must not reveal the corruptions of monks.
7. Nuns must not reproach monks.
8. Nuns must prostrate before all monks, even one who has been newly ordained but a day.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Janet Gyatso, “One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-excluded Middle,” *History of Religions*, 43 No. 2 (Nov., 2003), 91.

¹⁰⁹ Gutschow, 170-1.

Scholars hold extremely varied opinions as to the purpose and meaning of the Eight Chief Rules. Some, such as Kim Gutschow, view the rules as blatant signifiers of the belief in the inferiority and subordination of women within Tibetan culture and more widely in Buddhism. Her interpretation, which is based on her experiences in Zangskari culture, makes sense given wide beliefs throughout the Himalayas about the inferiority of female religious practitioners. One nun I interviewed at Dolma Ling, Karma Tsomo, also believed in the validity of the Eight Chief Rules as something that nuns need to keep the Order in line and functional. “Why these nuns has taking these eight rules is because you know the nuns, the woman has more afflictions, so that’s why. Anger and attachment and this kind are more with the womans.” For Karma Tsomo, Tibetan nuns need help from the Order of monks because they are more prone to anger and attachment.

In this model monks may be viewed as mentors to the Order of nuns. Even if one does not believe in the equality and autonomy of the two Orders, it is possible to understand the Eight Heavy Rules as functioning in a role other than subordination. For example, the Eight Heavy Rules can be seen as a system for the protection and preservation of both orders. For example, the rule about rainy season retreats may exist for the protection of nuns, who if in isolation in the wilderness might be potential victims of rape or abuse. While such arguments may not be fully convincing or promote the radical gender equality that a Western scholar might like to see within Buddhism, there are a variety of ways of interpreting the rules that grant Tibetan nuns agency and informal power within the monastic gender hierarchy. That being said, there are some nuns who deemphasize the Eight Heavy Rules as outdated, looking instead to create new models of mutual respect and autonomy for both Orders.

Given the complex and varied status of Tibetan nuns, and their position within the monastic hierarchy, many nuns still hope to be reborn as a monk in the next life. Such a rebirth is seen as the most meritorious and would be considered by most as the highest rebirth, constituting a step up the karmic ladder of reincarnation from a rebirth as a nun. In “Yeshe’s Tibetan Pilgrimage,” Kim Gutschow argues that it is common for most Tibetan nuns to desire rebirth as a monk. She explains. “Yeshe admits that she does not know whether she will be blessed with another human rebirth, but nonetheless she prays fervently to reborn as a monk.”¹¹⁰ Charlene Makley also encountered a number of nuns in Labrang who express a similar desire. She recalls that nuns see their monasticism as a “wishful emulation of monks” and hope that they will earn enough merits as nuns to be reborn as monks in the next life.¹¹¹ While these beliefs are certainly held by some Tibetan nuns, by describing life as a Tibetan nun as a practice round real monasticism as a monk, Makley undermines the legitimacy and seriousness of the nunhood.

Of the nuns I spoke with at Dolma Ling, many nuns do desire to be reborn as monks, but none of them discussed being a nun in terms of biding their time or simply accumulating merits for a male rebirth. Moreover, given that monks often have more opportunities, better facilities, and more status in Tibetan society, it is not surprising that some nuns would want to be monks. Tenzin Droma shares these sentiments in desiring rebirth as a monk: “I hope to become a monk in the next life.” She explained that she prays and wishes, as rebirth as a monk would be most meritorious. It is fascinating that Tenzin Droma desires rebirth as a monk, because she also believes that monks and nuns have similar intelligence and explained that presently both also have the same access to Buddhist education. Tenzin Droma did not

¹¹⁰ Gutschow, 217.

¹¹¹ Makley, 233.

cite any distinct gender differences, but yet remains adamant about her wishes to be reborn as a monk, which may speak to social disadvantages.

Kelsang Lhamo also reiterated the desire to be reborn as a monk in her interview: “If I were a monk, it would be better. Because... I don’t have idea.” Kelsang Lhamo had significant trouble verbalizing reasons why she hopes to be a monk, which might be the result of the sometimes subconscious, culturally conditioned biases towards womanhood. After I asked if she might prefer monkhood because of educational opportunities, she said she might prefer it because monks have a “better and easier” body, and explained that while experiencing menstruation she often wishes she is a monk. Therefore, while many nuns may wish to be reborn as monks it does not necessarily delegitimize their work as nuns. Especially now when opportunities and education are becoming more readily available for nuns in exile, some nuns are at Dolma Ling feel content to remain as nuns and view their intelligence and capabilities as equal with those of monks.

It is important to note that the desires of some nun to be monks may also be due to lay views on nunhood. Traditionally lay people have viewed nuns as less legitimate, and therefore less worth of respect than their male counterparts. In past decades beliefs that nuns “have little knowledge” and lack the work ethic required to pursue higher studies in Buddhism were prevalent both in the exile community and in Tibet. It is highly likely that these beliefs influence the nuns’ self-conceptions and religious ambitions, and may have prompted desires to be reborn as monks. However, the circumstances of Tibetan nuns have been rapidly changing within the last two decades, both in Tibet and in exile.

As Tibetan nuns have proven their capabilities, their status in society has been shifting. Karma Lekshe Tsomo explains that in exile Tibetan nuns are increasingly

considered full members of the Tibetan monastic community (*dge 'dun*, Sanskrit: *sangha*), which signals an increase in both status and respect from the laity.¹¹² The nuns of Dolma Ling held similar beliefs about the status of Tibetan nuns in traditional Tibetan society as compared to their status now. Tenzin Choeni recalls the changing opinions of the Tibetan laity: “It’s a long time that the society sees women as something, ‘they can’t do anything,’ like this. Male dominated society, it’s because of that... In all, I think they think the monks are better. Maybe [that is] the society outlook. But in individuals, if I am good and behave well, they say, ‘oh, *ani-la* is good. Oh, they are studying nice.” Tenzin Choeni believes that traditionally Tibetan society has doubted the capabilities of nuns and respected monks more. However, she explained to me that this was because of differences in opportunity rather than ability, and that nuns never had the chance to prove themselves. Now she thinks lay respect has more to do with the behavior of individuals and less to do with gender.

Tenzin Yetga thinks that there is some difference between lay respect for monks versus nuns. She explains, “Ten, fifteen years before... when see people the monks or the nuns they pay respects. And now it is. The peoples, lay mens and women they [have] come to respect all monks and nuns.” Sherab Sangmo also believes that laypeople now respect monks and nuns equally. According to Karma Lekshe Tsomo, in “Tibetan Nuns: New Roles and Possibilities,” as Tibetan nuns gain access to better education and resources the Tibetan laity has been increasingly respectful of them. She explains that as nuns prove their capabilities and demonstrate their abilities to do service to the Dharma and the laity, “they are gradually garnering support and proving themselves worthy of increased respect.”¹¹³

¹¹² Lekshe Tsomo, 186.

¹¹³ Lekshe Tsomo, 180.

Moreover, in *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*, she argues that because His Holiness the Dalai Lama has spoken on behalf of religious equality for all monastics, “any resistance to the idea of improving conditions for nuns is ordinarily expressed in more subtle ways, such as neglecting to help.”¹¹⁴ To this day both laywomen and laymen often give more monetary support to male monastic institutions more so than female institutions. This may be because the merits of gifts given to monks are still considered by most laypeople to be greater than the merits of gifts to nuns. Therefore, notwithstanding all of the changes in respect and opportunities for nuns, there are still hosts of ways that gender inequality manifests itself and continues to affect the opportunities for nuns. While opportunities to study philosophy and pursue higher education are now beginning to be made available for nuns in exile, resources are still extremely limited and scarce, and full ordination and the esteemed *geshe* degree are still points of contestation.

In their reactions to their own status within Tibetan society and within the monastic hierarchy, many Tibetan nuns are divided along what has become the generation gap, separating nuns forty and older from younger nuns who either arrived in exile in their youth or were born in exile. The generation gap sets apart the merit-oriented, often illiterate older generation of nuns and the more educated, ambitious younger generation. This new generation of Tibetan nuns in exile is much more vocal about their opinions and what they desire and need from the monastic community. These nuns are actively contesting old understandings of what it means to be a Tibetan nun, sometimes radically reconstituting old identities and ideologies such as the monastic gender hierarchy. In her ethnography Hanna Havnevik recalls that this young generation of nuns has been actively questioning the preferential treatment of monks and beliefs about the inferiority of nuns. There is a growing

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 185.

level of assertiveness among young Tibetan nuns in tackling the monastic “glass ceiling” that has in the past prevented them from full ordination and advanced subjects such as Buddhist philosophy.

Havenvik quotes one such nun:

For us younger nuns, we think that there is something wrong in this idea about women being of less value. If nuns and monks were given equal chances, many of the nuns would do just as well as the monks. The whole idea of women being inferior to men is handed down over the generation, and it is an accepted fact in Tibetan society. Few have questioned these norms.¹¹⁵

This young nun questions the heart of the monastic gender hierarchy when she proposes that it is based on socially constructed notions of women’s inferiority due to patriarchy rather than some inherent gender difference in intelligence or capabilities. By contesting the essential gender differences that have been accepted as fact within Tibetan society, this Tibetan nun begins the process of breaking down the assumptions on which the Tibetan gender hierarchy has been founded. With their changing beliefs about their capabilities, many nuns are also voicing their desire to be included in the dialogue about their own ordination.

Such views were also shared among nuns at Dolma Ling who were often divided along the generation gap as well. While all nuns receive an extremely comprehensive education at Dolma Ling, there was a marked difference between the older nuns and the often outspoken, opinionated, and politically active younger nuns. For example, many of the younger nuns at Dolma Ling were actively involved in the Tibetan protest of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and took part in the multiple marches around Dharamsala. Moreover, all of the nuns that I interviewed were in their teens and twenties and spoke varying levels of English, whereas I was barely able to communicate with the older nuns, who often spoke

¹¹⁵ Havnevik, 159.

only Tibetan. As the nuns continue to receive more comprehensive and rigorous education and religious training, they are becoming increasingly confident and outspoken. Slowly attitudes towards nuns are beginning to shift among the Tibetan lay people who, seeing what the nuns are capable of, are starting to offer nuns more support and respect.



Dolma Ling nuns during a philosophy course. *Photograph taken by author.*

II. Nuns' Education and Ordination

Although attitudes towards nuns are beginning to shift in the Tibetan laity, historically nuns' second-class monastic status have meant that Tibetan nunneries rarely had the economic resources to support their nuns. In "Yeshe's Tibetan Pilgrimage," Kim Gutschow argues that the nunnery has traditionally been "relatively impoverished" when compared to the widely supported male monastic establishments. Gutschow explains that the underfunding of Tibetan nunneries has meant that nuns must solicit donations from the Tibetan laity and that they must also rely on their own families for subsistence. Therefore,

because monasteries are well-funded institutions, monks are seldom forced to supplicate themselves before Tibetan laity and rarely need to ask their families for monetary support once they have joined the Order. However, the sometimes dire circumstances of Tibetan nunneries forces nuns to continue to rely on their families for support rather than being self sufficient, which further blurs the line between the nunnery and the household. Many present-day nunneries, such as those associated with the Tibetan Nuns Project, have come to rely primarily on international donations and material support. As nunneries have gained access to more resources through these means, they have begun to be seen as more legitimate by the lay community, who is hoped to become more supportive of nunneries in the coming years.

This situation is still difficult as the beliefs about the superiority of monks persist in many Tibetan communities. Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues that monks are seen as the ideal of humanity, and are thus supported financially by devoted members of the Tibetan laity. Moreover, she explains that the primary supporters of monasteries tend to be laywomen.¹¹⁶ This means that neither laywomen nor laymen support nunneries as they do monasteries. Gutschow expounds this view by stating that the success of Tibetan nunneries will depend on shifting attitudes within the lay community accompanied by ritual patronage, financial endowments, and renewed respect for female monastics.¹¹⁷ Both Gutschow and Lekshe Tsomo would agree with Havnevik who argues that improving the material conditions within nunneries would potentially attract more women to the monastic life and change both lay and monastic views that disregard nunneries as unimportant monastic institutions with little to offer Tibetan society.

¹¹⁶ Lekshe Tsomo, 8-9.

¹¹⁷ Gutschow, 256.

One way that Tibetan nuns might gain visibility and positively impact society is if the leadership roles within Tibetan monasticism and the lay community would become more available to them. Karma Lekshe Tsomo explains that Tibetan religious leadership is almost entirely run by fully ordained monks, whereas Tibetan nuns who are novices have not yet found a place for themselves within the official monastic leadership.¹¹⁸ Moreover, Hanna Havnevik explains that although they share androgynous maroon monastic robes, the range of formal positions available to monks versus nuns differs greatly.¹¹⁹ Because they have not yet attained full ordination, nuns have not yet achieved institutionalized positions as scholars and religious leaders. However, Havnevik is careful to note that the inequality within religious leadership has everything to do with opportunity and does not mean anything about the capabilities and intelligence of Tibetan nuns, although there are certain structural barriers that must be negotiated. With greater lay support and opportunities to higher education, nuns have the potential to begin to take up more formal leadership roles in the future.

It has only been within the last twenty years or so that a serious regimen of monastic study has been available to nuns. Traditionally, monasteries in Tibet were monastic universities which housed thousands to tens of thousands of monks and provided them with a rigorous and advanced religious education that ranged from a beginning education for novices to secret Tantric yoga practices for advanced initiates. Nunneries, on the other hand, were smaller in size with much fewer economic resources and a much simpler Buddhist education, which often focused on recitation and personal meditation practice.

In the past monastic education for nuns consisted of meditation and yoga, rather than philosophy and scholastic studies. More “practical” rituals were emphasized, such as

¹¹⁸ Lekshe Tsomo, 8-9.

¹¹⁹ Havnevik, 183.

memorizing prayers, fasting, and other small ways of accumulating merit. The advanced philosophical studies and elaborate yoga practices available to ordained monks were usually off limits for Tibetan nuns. Instead, nuns were encouraged to do the preliminary practice, which consists of 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 Vajrasattva *mantra* recitations, 100,000 *mandala* offerings, and 100,000 invocations of the lineage lama, which is enough to keep a nun busy for a number of years.¹²⁰ Moreover, the restriction of the practice of Tibetan nuns has been due in part to skepticism about the mental capacities of nuns. Also, as discussed earlier, many daughters were needed by their families and ended up living as nuns in their natal households or simply practicing informally. In “Yeshe’s Tibetan Pilgrimage,” Kim Gutschow explains the situation of monks and nuns in Tibet: “monks may pursue higher studies, which legitimize their status as ritual officiants, while nuns do not receive higher education nor any advanced ritual instruction.”¹²¹ Moreover, Hanna Havnevik argues that unlike the advanced monasteries, nunneries seldom offer teaching centers, which limits the options for nuns in yet another regard.

Although the opportunities for nuns in Tibet have been undeniably scarce, Rinchen Khando Choegyal warned me about essentializing or dramatizing the situation of female monastics in Tibet. Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Director of the Tibetan Nuns’ Project, former Minister of Education in the Tibetan Government in Exile, and the first President of the Tibetan Women’s Association, emphasizes the importance of keeping a balanced understanding of the situation of nuns in Tibet pre-1959. According to Rinchen Khando-la, the highest spiritual purpose of being a monk or nun is the “focus on inner being.”¹²² She thinks that the development of such inner peace and altruism is possible through meditation

¹²⁰ Gutschow, 55.

¹²¹ Gutschow, 225.

¹²² Rinchen Khando Choegyal, Interview by author. Dolma Ling Nunnery, Sidhpur, May 6, 2008.

and personal practice. Therefore, despite the historical situation of Tibetan nuns lacking resources and education, and being subordinate to monks, she believes that nuns have been able to pursue their spiritual development quite successfully. Rinchen Khando-la claims that many nuns in Tibet did not care if they were required to serve lamas, because the nuns' goal is to improve their *karma*, and because spiritual freedom is within every sentient being.

As Director of the Tibetan Nuns Project, Rinchen Khando-la certainly knows the value of a monastic education, and has dedicated her life to helping nuns and providing them with access to higher learning. However, her reminder to recognize the informal ways in which nuns in Tibet have been dedicating their lives to the practice of Buddhism, even if they lack formal training or education, prompts us to grant Tibetan nuns their due agency and recognize their success. That being said, Rinchen Khando-la and many Tibetan men and women in exile are working diligently to provide Tibetan nuns with the education and material resources they deserve. As more and more nuns in exile are able to attain a higher education and work towards the philosophical degrees that were previously available only to their male counterparts, Tibetan nuns' status is rapidly changing in society.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo argues that as nuns are successful in their educational achievements and further prove their capabilities, they “naturally erode myths about women's inferiority.”¹²³ In an interview with Hubert Decleer, seasoned Tibet scholar and former academic director of the Tibetan Studies program of the School for International Training, he explained to me the ways in which the situation of Tibetan nuns has rapidly changed in the past few decades.¹²⁴ Decleer elucidated that because nuns now learn philosophy and debate, they are starting to be taken seriously as scholars, and as a result their

¹²³ Lekshe Tsomo, 366.

¹²⁴ Decleer, Hubert, Interview by author. Thimpu, Bhutan, March 14, 2008.

social standing has been improving. According to Decleer, Tibetan nuns have proven themselves as a capable and important part of the Tibetan monastic community.

The nuns of Dolma Ling have very interesting analyses of the changing situation of Tibetan nuns. Tenzin Choeni believes that the circumstances of Tibetan nuns have changed greatly:

In earlier times there is a very big difference, because nun, the family sees them as something that when you become a nun, the family says oh, you don't have to study, you are a nun, you stay at home. In Tibet, [it is] something like that. But right now, actually it's okay for monks and nuns. The monks enjoy a lot of opportunities, because they have had these opportunities for a long time back. Because of that, they have a lot of opportunities. But still we have our opportunity right now, but it is very late now.

Tenzin Choeni argues that while nuns now have far more opportunities than they used to, these changes are very recent, and so their circumstances are shifting and developing. Tenzin Choedon feels that Tibetan nuns and women have begun to prove that their capabilities are equal to those of monks. "The women's what doing the monks and man, the woman's everything is doing well. The mens do teach, some of the womens also teacher. Some of the womens meditate, man is also doing this one. Buddhism is also same." Here Tenzin Choedon explains that women and nuns have matched their male counterparts in the practices of monasticism, teaching, and meditating, and are equally capable of succeeding in their Buddhist practice. Tenzin Choedon takes a position of radical equality through her bold confidence in the spiritual and intellectual faculties of women.

Sherab Sangmo also agrees with Tenzin Choeni and Tenzin Choedon about the capabilities of women. She thinks that there are no longer differences between monks and nuns because nuns now learn Buddhist philosophy and debate. She explained to me, "Before

nuns didn't get the opportunity to learn Buddhist Philosophy. These days, [by the] kindness of His Holiness all nuns get the opportunity what the monks get." It is important to note that Sherab Sangmo cites His Holiness the Dalai Lama as a primary reason that nuns currently have equal opportunities to monks. His Holiness has been an avid supporter of the higher education of Tibetan nuns. Quoted here by the Tibetan Nuns Project he says of the changing circumstances, "In ancient Tibet, educational programs were available in some nunneries. But in recent times there are no standard training programs in any of them. Dolma Ling can therefore set a precedent and become a model for nunneries throughout Tibet."¹²⁵ Indeed Dolma Ling is at the forefront of higher education for Tibetan nuns and serves as a model for a number of other nunneries in exile. It is also important to note that while the situation for nuns in exile are improving, Dolma Ling should not be seen as paradigmatic of all exile nunneries, because many nunneries are still lacking in funds and adequate resources.

Dolma Ling nunnery is open to nuns from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Its curriculum is rigorously academic offering a 15-year program in traditional Buddhist philosophy and debate along with courses in Tibetan language, English, mathematics, computer skills, and basic medical training. Sacred arts such as sand *mandala* making and butter sculpture are also available to the nuns.¹²⁶ Besides intensive classes in Buddhist philosophy and debate, the nuns also engage in comprehensive religious practices every day, including meditation and prayer recitation, which happens throughout the day beginning at 4:00am. The nuns also attend *puja* services in the prayer hall, usually twice a day. The higher education received at Dolma Ling is both rigorously religious and academic. Moreover, the nuns at Dolma Ling often make fieldtrips to teachings and conferences in

¹²⁵ Tibetan Nuns Project, "Dolma Ling," <http://www.tnp.org/projects/dolmaling/index.shtml>, (accessed March 14, 2009).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

surrounding areas such as McLeod Ganj, the heart of the Tibetan community in exile and the current residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The academic curriculum, therefore, is supplemented by engaging with the religious community throughout the Tibetan exile community and participating in the religious dialogues and debates that take place throughout the exile community.

The importance of Buddhist philosophy and debate at Dolma Ling cannot be emphasized enough. It is only within the last twenty years that a formal education in Buddhist philosophy has even been possible for nuns. Tibetan nuns at Dolma Ling engage in a style of Buddhist philosophical debate which has existed for Tibetan monks in monastic universities for centuries. According to the Tibetan Nuns Project's winter 2008 newsletter:

The core subject taught at Dolma Ling is Buddhist philosophy, and it is taught in the traditional manner, with daily sessions of intensive debate every afternoon and every evening in the courtyard. As the nuns use the logic of debate to probe the ramifications of the topics they are studying, they deepen and widen their knowledge of Buddhist philosophy.¹²⁷

Tenzin Choeni explained to me that debating the Buddhist philosophies learned in class is supposed to supplement and strengthen one's understandings of the materials. The arguing and debating of the intricacies of Buddhist concepts such as emptiness is essential to the mastery of the complexities of Buddhist philosophy, and helps one to internalize one's understandings.

The nuns' debate is modeled after the traditional style of debate performed by Tibetan monks. I was surprised by the lively energy of the philosophical debate, which includes a fair amount of clapping and shouting. One nun stands and presents her argument to another nun who is seated while listening. The nuns debate back and forth in the manner for

¹²⁷ Tibetan Nuns Project, "Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter Winter 2008," http://www.tnp.org/pdf/tnp_newsletter_08.pdf, (accessed March 14, 2009).

approximately two hours. Tenzin Choeni also explained to me that the standing nun raises her hand and brings it down into a clap every time she makes an important point. According to Tenzin Choeni, when the nun claps she is slamming the sword of wisdom down to all sentient beings to raise them out of suffering. This practice of philosophical debate has



become an essential part of the learning style of nuns at Dolma Ling and a key way that many nuns have been able to take ownership of their education.

Philosophical debate is no longer restricted to the campus of the nunnery, but has recently been a way for Tibetan nuns to engage with each other in dialogue and collaboration. According to the Tibetan Nuns Project website, since 1994 the nuns have begun participating in

Photograph of Tenzin Choeni (bottom left) debating. Jang Gonchoe, a month-long inter-nunnery debate session. Jang Gonchoe has been held for monks for centuries, but has just lately been held for Tibetan nuns through sponsorship by the Tibetan Nuns Project. According to the Tibetan Nuns Project newsletter, in the fall of 2007, Jang Gonchoe was hosted by Dolma Ling, where 120 nuns and 12 teachers from Dolma Ling, Geden Choeling, Jangchup Choeling, Jamyang Choeling and Kopan (in Nepal) nunneries gathered. The fall 2008 session was held at Jamyang Choeling, just outside of Dharamsala, where for the first time nuns from the Keydong Thukche Choling nunnery in Kathmandu have come to observe and nuns from Jampa Choling Nunnery in Kinnaur have returned for their second time.

Jang Gonchoe has been essential to helping Tibetan nuns to develop ownership over their own education and mastery of the tradition and helps to incite confidence within the nuns. Moreover, the practice of Buddhist philosophy has been another tool to help prepare the nuns to become teachers of their tradition. Most importantly, “Besides developing the nuns’ knowledge and debating technique, the annual Jang Gonchoe also helps develop community among the various nunneries that participate.”¹²⁸ By fostering camaraderie and friendly competition between nunneries, Jang Gonchoe allows the nuns to engage with each other within the broader monastic community.

While opportunities for nuns have been rapidly changing, some topics remain points of contestation within the Tibetan monastic community and the greater exile community. One opportunity that is only recently available to nuns at monastic institutions such as Dolma Ling is the *geshe* degree (Tibetan: *dge bshes*), meaning virtuous knowledge or wisdom. The *geshe* degree is part of a longstanding tradition of Tibetan monastic scholasticism, which has been an integral aspect of male monasticism in Tibet for centuries, and is the highest degree awarded by Tibetan monastic universities. The curriculum for the degree is approximately fifteen to twenty years of intensive philosophical study. Traditionally the *geshe* degree has not been offered to women, who have lacked the advanced philosophical educational and training it requires. Moreover, the degree is comprised of the study of the “Collected Topics” (Tibetan: *bsdus-gra*), which include the Perfection of Wisdom (Sanskrit: *Prajñāpāramitā*, Tibetan: *Par-phyin*), Middle View (Sanskrit: *Madhyamaka*, Tibetan: *dbuma*), Valid Cognition or Logic (Sanskrit: *Pramana*, Tibetan: *tshadma*), Discipline

¹²⁸ Ibid.

(Sanskrit: *Vinaya*, Tibetan: '*Dul-ba*), and Higher Knowledge (Sanskrit: *Abhidharma*, Tibetan: *mDzod*).¹²⁹

According to Tenzin Choedon, the only reason that nuns have not yet become *geshes* is because there have not been opportunities open to nuns. She explains, “But the nuns didn’t get more any chance before, therefore, now *ani* and no *geshe*. We will become *geshe*, they will be doing this one.” Tenzin Choedon told me that there are three nuns currently on the way to becoming *geshes* at Dolma Ling, and she has every faith that they will succeed in this regard. While Champa Dechen recognized that nuns at Dolma Ling have begun work on the degree, she personally wished that she were a monk so that it would be easier for her to attain the degree and work as a *gegen* (teacher). Sherab Sangmo thinks that it is possible for women to become *geshes*: “I think if we graduate all philosophy subjects like *Madhyamaka*, *Pāramitā*, all, if we have knowledge, they [nuns will] become *geshe-la*.” Tenzin Choeni also felt positively about nuns’ capabilities: “I think [that] we can do this.” Tenzin Choeni believes that if nuns are given the opportunity they certainly have the potential to earn the *geshe* degree. Moreover, she thinks that Tibetan society has gotten much better in terms of gender equality because of the support of His Holiness and nuns who have proved themselves capable.

The Tibetan Nuns Project website also explains that after finishing their studies some nuns have gone on to teach in Tibetan schools in exile. The Tibetan Nuns Project aims to provide graduated nuns with teaching credentials so that they can serve as teachers in surrounding nunneries and in the greater exile community, which are slowly growing in number. This is one way that Dolma Ling nunnery is working to open up formal leadership

¹²⁹ The Government of Tibet in Exile, “The *Geshe* Degree,” <http://www.tibet.com/Buddhism/geshe.html>, (accessed April 6, 2009).

positions such as teaching within the monastic and lay communities that were previously not available to nuns. Furthermore, the various income-generating projects at Dolma Ling are extremely important in that they fund the nuns' own education and further foster a sense of self-sufficiency.

Another topic widely contested among the Tibetan population, and other Buddhist nations throughout Asia, is the topic of full ordination for nuns. Full ordination has never existed in Tibet, although it does exist in other Buddhist nations such as China. The dialogue regarding full ordination exists on an international level, and there have been multiple conferences of nuns and scholars on the topic. Therefore, this analysis of Tibetan nuns is situated within the greater discourse on full ordination. Moreover, in reference to full ordination for Tibetan nuns, His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains that full ordination has never existed in Tibet, because the journey across the Himalayas was extremely difficult in early times. Therefore, no *bhiksuniīs*, or fully ordained nuns, ever came to Tibet to pass on a *bhiksuniī* lineage. There have been a few Tibetan nuns who have attained full ordination through the Chinese tradition, but most of them have been Western nuns within the Tibetan tradition, such as *Bhiksuniīs* Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Thubten Chödrön.

The Tibetan Nuns Project Winter newsletter, which has a brief article about full ordination for Tibetan nuns, explains that the topic of ordination for nuns has been historically complex.¹³⁰ The article explains that in countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka full ordination was either never established or has died out throughout the centuries. While opinions vary on the topic, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been an advocate for full ordination for Tibetan nuns. When he spoke at the International Conference of Nuns in

¹³⁰ “Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter Winter 2008,” http://www.tnp.org/pdf/tnp_newsletter_08.pdf, (accessed March 14, 2009).

Bodhgaya, India in February of 1987, His Holiness showed his firm support in the matter. “Speaking personally as a Tibetan Buddhist, if an authentic *bhiksunī* lineage like this could be established within the Tibetan tradition, this would truly be something to be welcomed.”¹³¹ While it is wonderful that Tibetan nuns have the full support of His Holiness, it is important to note that the support of His Holiness does not mean that Tibetan nuns are guaranteed full ordination. His Holiness the Dalai Lama does not have the authority to simply institute a *bhiksunī* lineage within the Tibetan tradition because he thinks it is right. While His Holiness functions as both the political and religious figurehead for Tibet, his authority is part of a highly structured system of lamas and other religious leaders.

Therefore, there has been an ongoing dialogue within the Tibetan community and internationally about the full ordination of Tibetan nuns. Until recently, few nuns were actually engaged in the discussion. However, with more experience in advanced subjects such as philosophical debate and a greater sense of confidence, many Tibetan nuns are more able to present their own arguments on the issue. Moreover, as Tibetan nuns advance in their studies and become more vocal on these issues, opposition to their full ordination has been steadily reduced. While there have been a number of forums on the topic of full ordination for nuns, such as another international conference in Hamburg in 2007, there is a great amount of ambiguity surrounding the issue. According to the Tibetan Nuns Project newsletter, “within the Tibetan monastic community, there is still no clear agreement on whether it is possible to bestow full ordination within the Tibetan tradition; and if it is, how best to proceed.”¹³² One potential problem for the full ordination of Tibetan nuns would be

¹³¹ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “Opening Speech of His Holiness the Dalai Lama,” In *Sakyadhītā: Daughters of the Buddha*, (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1988) 44.

¹³² “Tibetan Nuns Project Newsletter Winter 2008,” http://www.tnp.org/pdf/tnp_newsletter_08.pdf, (accessed March 14, 2009).

from which tradition to get the *bhiksuni*s, because both *bhiksus* and *bhiksuni*s are needed for the full ordination of a nun.

More recently, in April of 2008, a two-day conference was held on the topic of *bhiksuni* ordination for Tibetan nuns in Dharmasala. The conference was prompted by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and organized by the Department of Religion and Culture of the Tibetan Government in Exile. It gathered political and spiritual leaders, and monks, and included nuns as observers. Sixteen monks from the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism attended and held a public discussion. Also, by the request of Tibetan Nuns Project Director Rinchen Khando Choegyal, sixteen nuns from local Dharamsala nunneries attended the conference as overseers. His Holiness the Karmapa, who attended the conference as an observer, requested to hear the nuns' opinions on the matter, as they would be the ones taking the vows. According to the TNP newsletter, "Several nuns responded by saying that while they certainly do want full ordination, if possible, they prefer to receive it from the *Mulasarvastivada* lineage (as Tibetan monks do), rather than *Dharmagupta* lineage followed in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, which is what nuns in the Tibetan tradition who have received full ordination have followed to date."¹³³ It is substantial that the nuns were able to voice their opinions and concerns at the conference, because they should also play an active role in whatever decision is finally made. While the conference did not resolve the issue, it showed that there has been growing support for full ordination. His Holiness also noted that whether or not one is a novice nun or *bhiksuni*, the fact that female monastics are taking an active interest in the study of Buddhism is most important. In conclusion, dialogue about full ordination and opportunities such as the *geshe* degree were unthinkable just a few decades ago. Resources such as the Tibetan Nuns Project and Sakyadhita, which is an international

¹³³ Ibid.

association of Buddhist women founded in 1987, have helped to found and support more than seven nunneries in exile. Moreover, Skyadhita is dedicated to helping establish a *bhiksuni* lineage for Tibetan nuns.¹³⁴ With these resources, continuing international economic support, access to higher learning and philosophical debate, and the resulting growth in encouragement from the Tibetan laity, Tibetan nuns and nunneries in exile are beginning to flourish.

¹³⁴ Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women, <http://www.sakyadhita.org/index.html>, (accessed April 18, 2009).

Chapter 4. Tibetan Nuns' Views on Gender and Its Relation to Self-Realization

I. *Ani Is Like Pumo, But Not Like Laywomen*

In her dissertation *Embodying the Sacred: Gender and Monastic Revitalization in China's Tibet*, Charlene Makley does a close anthropological analysis of the religious revitalization in the monastery town of Labrang, in the southwest Gansu province of China. Through her ethnography and comprehensive knowledge on Tibetan Buddhism and culture, Makley analyzes the gender of Tibetan nuns in terms of what she calls "monastic androgyny." While she desires for nuns to fit this category, expressing the ideal of a non-gendered androgynous monasticism, she concludes that this "third gender," as it were, is really an articulation of male monasticism and is unfortunately not gender inclusive. Makley argues that Tibetan nuns are limited and bound by their sexed bodies, and marginalized in Tibet because they stand outside of the traditional sex-gender system: unable to transcend their gender, but having rejected reproductive and lay roles, they occupy a liminal space in Tibetan society.¹³⁵ Moreover, because nuns cannot transcend their gender, Makley explains that nuns feel themselves to be "essentially female."¹³⁶

While Makley's dissertation is thorough and accurately depicts the situation of nuns in Labrang at the time she wrote her dissertation in the late 1990s, her descriptions of the gender of Tibetan nuns in Tibet contrasts greatly with the experiences and views of the nuns of Dolma Ling in exile. This might serve to affirm the diversity and heterogeneity of the experiences of Tibetan nuns both in Tibet and in exile. In the final chapter of this thesis I will describe some of the gendered experiences of the nuns I spoke with at Dolma Ling.

¹³⁵ Makley, 183-210.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

Even within the relatively small sampling of Dolma Ling, the nuns I spoke with hold varied and contrasting opinions about their own gender identity as it relates to the gender of laywomen on the one hand and monks on the other. The Tibetan nuns I interviewed spoke about their gender in discrete ways, explaining it in terms of their bodies and monasticism, and contrasting their roles with other members of Tibetan society. Many of the nuns speak of the ways their sex has remained unchanged, but their gender has shifted through monastic praxis. The nuns also discuss how their role within society is now different from laywomen, as their daily lives center on studying Buddhism, rather than combing their hair or caring for children.

While discussing the topic of gender with the nuns at Dolma Ling, I used a litany of terms for female gender such as woman, female, and *pumo* (the Tibetan term for girl also loosely used for women), in order to get at the differences between the gender of nuns and the gender of laywomen that would transcend the language barrier. After a few confounding interviews, Kelsang Lhamo was kind enough to explain the terms as she understands them. According to Kelsang Lhamo, “*pumo*” is used to describe the physical sex of a woman, and therefore is applicable to nuns. However, “woman” refers to female gender, and therefore is only applicable to laywomen. While not every nun used the same gender vocabulary, this framework is a helpful entry point.

When asked if she feels like a *pumo*, Kelsang Lhamo explained to me that she no longer relates to such a gender identity: “No. I still look like *pumo*, but I am not like lay [women].” Tenzin Choedon has a similar understanding of her gender; she acknowledges her “*pumo* body,” but does not believe that she shares any other similarities with laywomen. Tenzin Yetga articulates her gender identity in somewhat different language. While she still

identifies with the term woman, she recognizes the difference of her gender as compared to laywomen: “Yeah, I am a woman, yes. But my role is a little bit different than the lay.” Tenzin Yetga contrasts her role as a monastic with the gender roles typically prescribed for women. Tenzin Droma, on the other hand, rejects any notion of female gender: “no, no, I do not have this gender.” She explained that in her mind she does not consider herself a *pumo* (girl), just *ani* (nun).

Tenzin Choeni explained that she does consider herself a *pumo* even though she is an *ani*. When asked what it means to be a woman or *pumo*, she replied, “I just have body of woman, I think.” Tenzin Choeni expressed multiple times that she often forgets she is a woman in daily life at the nunnery, because she is so focused on her studies and because gender is not a prominent aspect of her monastic experiences. She even spoke in jest of her monastic androgyny: “If you are a nun, you can walk like a boy.” However, she explained that there are certain circumstances in which she is reminded of her femaleness. “When you go outside alone you feel oh, I am a woman and then you are very vulnerable, right? That is the biggest problem.” When she is outside of the confines of the nunnery, Tenzin Choeni becomes acutely aware of her female body, which despite her monasticism, is vulnerable to rape and other offenses. Another situation when Tenzin Choeni is reminded of her gender is when she wants to visit a male teacher’s office or room with questions about Buddhist philosophy. She explained that in these circumstances there are restrictions, codified in the rules of monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), about monks and nuns being alone together that sometimes limit her ability to engage with her teachers.

Furthermore, there is an intriguing contrast between the almost polar views of Tsering Yangpal and Sherab Sangmo. Although she is a nun, Tsering Yangpal continues to think of

herself as a *pumo*. She explains, “I think it’s the same, but a little just change mind and change clothes, but most is same, [between] women and nuns.” Of all my informants, Tsering Yangpal’s beliefs stand out in that they underscore the similarities between nuns and laywomen, rather than the differences. Sherab Sangmo, on the other hand, thinks that there are major differences between the gender roles of laywomen and nuns. “Yeah, I think I am just *ani*. There is a many difference [between] lay women and nuns. Because we have to take vow, they don’t have. We have to think always in our mind, I can’t do this or that, also.” Sherab Sangmo articulates the restrictions on a nun’s behavior because of the vows she takes. Champa Dechen also expressed the limitations on the behavior of nuns as compared with the freedom of laywomen: “a lady can do everything she wants to do.” When asked what some of the freedoms of laywomen include, Champa Dechen cited dancing as one thing she could not do as a nun.

It is fascinating to hear the variety of opinions about the nuns’ self-perceived gender and the ways nunhood can be viewed as both limiting and freeing. It is important to understand that the monastic life is extremely rigorous mentally, spiritually, and physically. Nuns at Dolma Ling wake every morning around 4am for morning prayers and meditation, and continue on with their full schedule of classes, prayer services, chores, and meditation, usually ending after 11:00pm. This lifestyle, with little free time, is intended to keep one focused on higher spiritual goals and learning, which are the purpose of monasticism. Tenzin Choeni, for instance, was very outspoken about the benefits and opportunities of being a nun. “Developing myself gives lot of opportunities. [I] have a lot of time for myself. And laywomen, I don’t think they have, because they have to take care of their earrings and which clothes and which party they have to attend. It’s a matter of time and opportunity, I think.”

Tenzin Choeni finds herself with more time to spend studying because she has done away with the trivialities of lay life, such as choosing clothes every day, which is why she articulates the differences between lay life and monasticism as time and opportunity. In the quote above Tenzin Choeni also speaks to the different priorities of laywomen and nuns. While married women spend all of their time on their families, and occasionally on frivolous activities such as choosing earrings, nuns dedicate their time to education and spiritual cultivation, having renounced the *samsara*-filled distractions of lay life.

Although dancing and earrings might be enjoyable on one level, Champa Dechen has chosen the extremely difficult and austere path of spiritual development, through which she has begun to see the emptiness of such trivialities. Even though she understands that monasticism restricts certain advantages, she thinks it highlights other more important opportunities such as spiritual fulfillment and a less self-centered outlook on the world. She explains, “If I were lay woman, I can only think of my [self], but as *ani* I think of everyone.” Champa Dechen considers the understanding of right mind to be one of the most valuable and enlightening opportunities of being a nun. Both Tenzin Choeni and Champa Dechen view monastic transformation in terms of a change in mental attitude and self-conception, through which they are better able to understand the world.

While nuns such as Sherab Sangmo recognize that dedicating one’s life to Buddhism through monasticism puts some constraints on one’s behavior, most nuns speak about nunhood in an extremely positive light. In *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, Rita M. Gross notes that counter to Westerners’ and outsiders’ assumptions about the limitations of being a monastic, most nuns emphasize the intrinsic freedom of their lifestyle.¹³⁷ While monastics

¹³⁷ Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 242.

may be giving up the ability to partake in surface-level activities, their studies assist them in the realization of non-attachment and move them on the path towards *Nirvana*. Moreover, within monastic communities, discipline and freedom are viewed as compatible, for it is the discipline and asceticism of monasticism that liberate one from the absorption of mundane concerns and ultimately leads to a truer sense of mental freedom.

Champa Dechen believes that being a nun has opened many opportunities for her and allowed her to have experiences she never could have as a laywoman. She explained to me that every day she thinks that she can do good work and help people, which makes her feel extremely peaceful and healthy-minded. However, as Champa Dechen told me, “it would not be so if I was a girl.” Tenzin Yetga mostly agrees with Champa Dechen about the freedom of being a nun. She explains:

It is a little bit freedom... We have more times for studying or practicing or traveling for other monastery or going for teachings. If we have family I look for childrens. If they are very small, it is very difficult to get a child and clothes and go to the teachings and sit in the teachings the child cry for something and something. It is very difficult. Now our time is free. We have no worry about all these things.

Here Tenzin Yetga highlights how difficult it can be for laywoman to practice Buddhism because of their children and other obligations. She seems relieved to be able to dedicate herself to studying and to be free from the chaos of lay life. Tsering Yangpal, on the other hand, believes that in many ways laywomen have more privileges. “I think maybe more get freedom women... Because they have any rule [vows], because they don’t practice any about Buddhism.” The extremely rigorous and regimented life of nuns, as explained earlier in this section, validates Tsering Yangpal’s viewpoint. However, every nun I spoke with sees the benefits of life as a renunciant as far outweighing whatever difficulties the stringent rules

of monasticism might cause. Tsering Yangpal also recognizes that nuns certainly have better access to education and the practice of Buddhism.

Ani Karma Tsomo views the opportunities to practice and study Buddhism as invaluable. “When I became a nun, in my mind I found that I get lots of time to pray and lots of time to study... We learn about Buddhism, [and] then I can get peace.” Many nuns like Karma Tsomo renounce the *samsara* and conflicts of lay life for what they see to be a higher religious goal. Every nun I spoke with views nunhood as an extremely peaceful and beneficial form of being. Moreover, Kelsang Lhamo believes that it is actually easier to be a nun:

Yes, I think I have more freedoms, because when the lay, when they have to marry, they have many problems and we don't have so much. We don't have to think about somebody else... It's easier [to be a nun]. In lay life there is also so much to do. In this monastery life we have only our studies... In lay life I comb the hair and so much work to do. In the monastery, I just one month the shave and nothing.

Kelsang Lhamo highlights here that monasticism helps to simplify one's life and allows one to focus fully on education and religious practice. Also noteworthy about Kelsang Lhamo's views is the way she describes the autonomy of Tibetan nuns, such as their ability to take journeys. Kelsang Lhamo was also one of the only nuns to mention the Tibetan marches to protest the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, which were occurring while these interviews were conducted. She explained to me that because monastics have renounced the lay life, they have no real ties to family or other obligations, and have no attachments in this world. She explains, “In Tibet when the march started all of our monks and nuns go with, [because] they don't have to think about something else... In lay life [they] have to think [of] their child and their wife.” As such, monastics in Tibet have traditionally been at the forefront of political

protests, because they are most readily able to sacrifice their lives without disrupting the lives of others.

Tenzin Choeni also articulates the amount of agency and autonomy she has as a nun. She explains that because she does not have a family, she is able to do what she wants, mainly, study Buddhism. When asked to explain the particular ways she has more freedom, Tenzin Choeni mused about what her life would be like as a laywoman:

If I am a lay woman, I have to share my time with my child. If I want to do something you have to take care of your child. And if you want to do something your husband [will say] ‘no,’ or something like that. And even though you want to say ‘oh I don’t care about my child and husband,’ you can’t go on and leave all of them. \

Many of the nuns who describe the troubles and *samsara* of lay life talk about it with a sense of panic and suffocation. By contrast, many of the nuns reflect on monasticism with gratitude and tranquility. Tenzin Choedon is equally as grateful to have renounced life as a layperson, which she sees as burdened with more work and tension. Moreover, she sees laypeople as distracted and fundamentally lacking in the “right mind” that helps her to understand the world around her. Although some nuns recognize certain difficulties of monasticism, not a single nun ever articulated a moment’s doubt about her decision. Tenzin Choeni’s love for Buddhism and monasticism shone through in every statement about her experiences: “It brings me lot of courage and hope within me. I am free now.”

II. *Anis* v. Monks: Differences in Mind and Body

When asked to speak about the gender differences between nuns and monks many nuns have equally diverse views as to the relative “equality” of monks and nuns and the implications of gender and physiological differences on their respective intellectual capabilities. Champa Dechen interprets gender difference in terms of the purely physical:

“Men’s bodies are clean and comfortable, but women have not.” Here Champa Dechen harkens back to common beliefs about the pure and sexless bodies of monks as compared with the impure and inescapably *samsara*-ridden bodies of nuns. Moreover, Ani Karma Tsomo thinks that women have more suffering and than men. She explains, “We girls, *anilas*, we have lots of problems, you know. Lots of disease. We have ignorance. It is said to the girls [that] they have more ignorance than they boys.” Champa Dechen and Karma Tsomo both note the “diseases” and discomfort of the female body, viewing bodily difference as the main gender distinction between women and men.

Menstruation is one of the most prominent bodily differences between monks and nuns. Nuns at Dolma Ling hold a variety of beliefs about menstruation and its significance in their own lives. Some view it as a natural and necessary process, while others think of it as a nuisance and a burden. Sherab Sangmo, for example, believes that childbirth and menstruation are the primary reasons that women suffer more than men, but does not think that women are inherently dirty or impure as a result. While she does note that menstruation is good because “all the dirty blood come[s] out,” she also explains that it can cause her problems and pain. Sherab Sangmo agrees with Karma Tsomo in thinking that women face more diseases on the whole than men, and cites illness and menstruation as disturbances to a nun’s studying and pursuit of enlightenment.

Menstruation is also somewhat problematic for Tenzin Yetga, especially as a nun with obligations and studies. Tenzin Yetga explains that when experiencing pain due to menstruation, “At that time for me I can’t interested in doing something or studying and all these things... It’s a bit disturbance.” Ani Tsering Yangpal also finds it difficult to deal with menstruation. She believes it is dirty, inconvenient, and “it is so difficult and so problem,”

because sometimes the bleeding stains her clothes. Moreover, as Buddhist practitioners, some nuns struggle with menstruation because it distracts their mind from study, bringing their focus back to the pain and discomfort of their bodies, therefore causing a level of bodily attachment. Many of the nuns expressed some distress regarding the self-centered thoughts menstruation often inspires. However, most of the nuns have also come to view menstruation as an impermanent phenomenon, which does not pose an insurmountable blockade to the Buddhist goal of right mind.

As Ani Tenzin Yetga phrased it, “this is a little bit problem, otherwise, woman life is not a very bad I think... If you think your life is good, then woman’s life is good.” According to Tenzin Yetga, one’s mindset is extremely important in shaping one’s bodily experience and practice. When asked about menstruation, Tenzin Choedon also responded rather positively, “It is clean this one, it is no problem... It is not a dirty.” It is interesting to note that some nuns believe that menstruation is very dirty and impure, while others such as Sherab Sangmo and Tenzin Choedon view it in physiological terms, as purifying the body of “old blood.” Ani Karma Tsono thinks of the pain and disturbance of menstruation as burning off her bad *karma*, which gives her peace of mind. By viewing menstruation in the familiar terms of *karma*, some nuns are able to accept it as something with both a physiological and religious purpose.

Champa Dechen joked that when she experiences menstruation she often she wishes she were a monk. In order to reconcile herself with menstruation, moreover, Champa Dechen reminds herself that women all over the world experience the pain of menstruation, and that through this connection she “can take on all of their pain.” Viewing her pain as representative of all women, Champa Dechen believes she can help other women and ease

their suffering through her own. This understanding of taking on the *samsara* of others is common among Tibetan nuns. In thinking about menstruation in the religious terms of *karma*, bodily impermanence, and *bodhisattva*-like compassion, nuns are able to use their knowledge of Buddhism to understand and come to terms with their female bodies.

Furthermore, other nuns at Dolma Ling articulate gender difference in terms of intellectual capabilities, or the “size” of one’s mind. Tsering Yangpal explains, “I think nuns is so small mind, but monks have a stronger mind, because they have big mind, but I don’t know why.” When pushed to further explicate the differences in the minds of monks and nuns Tsering Yangpal explained that women are capable of attaining enlightenment even though mind is smaller, but spiritual achievements are more difficult for women, so they must work harder. It is interesting that Tsering Yangpal held beliefs about the smallness of women’s minds, but could not provide a foundation for such beliefs in scripture or biology. This indicates that she might have adopted the prevailing understanding of women’s minds from her family at a young age, rather than coming to these conclusions on her own.

Tenzin Yetga believes that primary difference between monks and nuns is the nature of their mind:

There is a little bit differences, yeah... Our mind is just quite going here and there, and women is [more] talkative than the boys and more doing just small and small things... [For] example, the monk or the boys, when they study they study for a short time. For the short time they study very deeply, yes. And [then] they play. For the womens, they study for whole days and they study every times, but it is very difficult to [learn] what we study, because woman has too many thinking about the others, [and] outside world. I think that boys have no thinking about the others.

Tenzin Yetga thinks that the nature of women’s minds contributes to their suffering, because women have a tendency to be distracted by trivial matters such as gossip. She believes that nuns lack the focus and deep thought of monks, and often struggle to understand Buddhist

concepts. Karma Tsomo agrees with Tenzin Yetga on this matter: “The girls, they talk lots of silly... They become angry, you know? The boys share together whatever they have. The girls are different from the boys.” Here Tenzin Yetga and Karma Tsomo refer back to the story of the ogress, noting what they see to be some of the fundamental gender traits of women, which include flightiness, anger, short temper, and tendencies to gossip. When these qualities are compared with the traits of men such as studiousness, intellectualism, mild temper, and sometimes generosity, one can understand why nuns might think the mind of a monk is better. Moreover, it is not quite clear how Tibetan society came to develop these views about women. Most likely some negative depictions of women were transmitted with Indian culture and the Buddhist canon, while other such views already existed in Tibetan society before contact with Buddhism.

Ani Karma Tsomo outright explained to me that she thinks the monk’s mind is better than the nun’s. However, she does not seem to think that the practice of Buddhism is a waste of time for women as a result of their intellectual capabilities. To the contrary she believes: “If one do study good in Buddhism, then *ani* also can stop the bad thinkings and stop gossip and if they practice well, then I think there is no difference. And they understand the philosophy, Buddhism.” According to Karma Tsomo nuns simply must work harder to compensate for their weak minds. She explains, “If I practice my best, then I can stop the ignorance.” It seems as though her understanding of the inherence of *samsara* and ignorance in the female experience has motivated Karma Tsomo to take up the Buddhist path as a monastic. In this way Karma Tsomo negotiates her beliefs about the ignorance of women with her own Buddhist practice. Moreover, it is fascinating and complex the ways that nuns such as Tsering Yangpal, Tenzin Yetga, and Karma Tsomo reconcile their personal beliefs

about their own capabilities with a changing but present social ideology of the inferiority of women.

Furthermore, Tenzin Yetga, who believes there is a difference between the intellectual capabilities of monks and nuns, also notes situational differences in everyday life as the biggest problems for nuns. The reality that nuns are often vulnerable while traveling outside the nunnery leads most nuns to travel in groups of two or more. Tenzin Yetga sees such social circumstances and restrictions on religious and educational opportunities as additional reasons why it is more difficult to be female. Moreover, Tenzin Choeni, is aware of this difference every time she leaves the nunnery alone: “When I go out alone, I think yes, I am a woman! I have to take care of myself.” Even if nuns believe that they are equal with monks in all other aspects of life, this circumstance of traveling alone is one unavoidable way that nuns are confronted with their female gender.

A number of the nuns at Dolma Ling do not believe that there are any noteworthy differences between the gender and capabilities of monks and nuns. Tenzin Choedon thinks that the only significant difference between monks and nuns is in their physical strength. “Little bit I think the womans are weak. Weak, the bodies. Because monks is strong and doing everything. But sometimes the womans are going away on alone and they are afraid. But, when monks go alone away they haven’t any afraid. I think that, but most of them are same.” Tenzin Choedon believes that nuns are occasionally disadvantaged because they lack the physical strength of monks, especially in situations when nuns are on journeys. However, this is the only difference she could think of, and she reiterated, “All of human being is same ... because they have two eyes, one nose, [one] mouth, everything is just like the same.” Tenzin Choedon also thinks that there are some positive and negative things

about both monks and nuns, but ultimately “more things are same.” When I asked her if there were differences between the minds of monks and nuns Tenzin Choedon explained that all monastics have the same capabilities to teach, meditate, and practice Buddhism. Similarly, Champa Dechen believes that being a nun or woman is not lower than being a monk or man. Champa Dechen thinks that women are physically weaker than men, but that women have different and equally important strengths than men. Tenzin Droma also believes that monks and nuns have similar intelligence and thinks that the primary gender difference between the two is the reality of their sexed bodies: “one is man and one is girl.”

While sex differences between monks and nuns inevitably remain present, the physical performance of monasticism does a considerable amount to diminish corporeal gender differences. The wearing of the androgynous maroon robes for Tibetan monks and nuns signifies the removal of gender identifiers such as clothing and jewelry, and functions as a physical reminder of their monasticism. The look of monastic androgyny is further compounded by the identical shaved heads of monks and nuns. In her discussion on gender within Buddhist monasticism, Rita Gross argues that working within a monastic model that emphasizes androgyny over androcentrism shifts the framework so that humanness becomes normative and affirmed in place of maleness.¹³⁸ In this androgynous model the physical components of monasticism cancel out gender difference between monks and nuns and further weaken the renunciants’ attachments to selfhood, including attachments to gender identification. By de-emphasizing the performance of gender, monastics turn inward, towards spiritual cultivation and the teachings of the Buddha.

III. Revisiting Gender in Buddhism: Their Spiritual Capabilities

¹³⁸ Gross, 223.

In this final section I would like to highlight the beliefs of Dolma Ling nuns on gender in Buddhism and the spiritual capabilities of female practitioners, relating back to the first chapter of this thesis. The nuns of Dolma Ling approach the topic of gender in Buddhism in a variety of ways, some discussing their own gender as it relates to Buddhist practice and others addressing the relationship of women to key Buddhist doctrines. As noted above, the eventual goal of monastic practice is to shed attachments to the illusory conception of self, which includes letting go of false notions of gender. In *Women's Religious Expression in Tibetan Buddhism*, Linda LaMacchia addresses monastic perspectives on gender. She argues that in their life's dedication to Buddhism nuns strive towards a non-gendered human ideal. Moreover, LaMacchia elucidates, "They face obstacles as women, but the effort is to follow a path and reach a goal that is not gendered."¹³⁹ In their monastic practice gender is far less important than cultivating right mind and right outlook.

Ani Champa Dechen, for instance, has very interesting views about Buddhism and gender. She begins by explaining that Buddhism has led to much better gender roles in Tibet. When asked why this is, she told me that Buddhism mandates that one should have compassion for all people, regardless of gender. Furthermore, she explained that as she gets deeper into Buddhist philosophy and "higher thinking" her attachments to her gender identity and sense of self are beginning to fade. Expressing her beliefs about the totality of her gender transformation she explains, "I haven't in my mind [the thought] 'I'm a girl, I'm a lady,' because I have changed all of my body and all of my mind... now I am a nun." This profound articulation highlights Champa Dechen's experiences of both bodily and mental

¹³⁹ Linda Jean LaMacchia, "Women's Religious Expression in Tibetan Buddhism: Songs and Lives of the *Jomo* (Nuns) of Kinnuar, Northwest India," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2001) 283.

transformation through her monasticism. The more that Champa Dechen learns about Buddhism, the more she is able to shed old understandings, change her mind, and deepen her understanding of the doctrine of no-self (Skt: *anātman*). Through the dedicated study and practice of Buddhism, Champa Dechen moves closer to LaMacchia's non-gendered human ideal. Within this framework one might begin to understand monastic androgyny as it is expressed by Tibetan nuns.

Furthermore, Tenzin Choedon focuses on the diversity of human experience and identity as opposed to gender difference. She explains, "The Lord Buddha says it is a good man and good womans. Everything that he teach. All people has different mind. People have different mind, therefore they are different. I think that... All *geshe* is like this one, fingers. All finger is not the same. These are different. Therefore, mind is also [different]." According to Tenzin Choedon the Buddha did not distinguish between the capabilities of men and women. Through her example of the human finger, she explains that all people are unique regardless of gender. Moreover, this quote relates back to the Mahāyāna doctrine of the *Tathāgatagarbha*, which states that the potential for enlightenment is in all living beings, and thus all are capable of practicing Buddhism. In order to refute arguments in favor of gender inequality in Tibetan Buddhism, Tenzin Choedon references *Chod-juk*, or *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life (Bodhisattvacharyāvātāra)*, which is a key Buddhist text dedicated to the generation of the mind of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) by way of the six perfections (*Pāramitās*), as written by esteemed Buddhist monk and scholar Śāntideva in the sixth century. Regarding *Chod-juk* Tenzin Choedon explains:

Do you know *Chod-juk*? [It is] one of our Tibetan scriptures. It has most the woman has the bad body and thinking and some of this, but His Holiness the Dalai Lama said the writer is a man. Therefore, he said [about] the womans. If the author is a woman, then she write about the mans, because they are

different to change. It is also to example to the man body. It is the same body. Therefore, I reason they are the same.

Meditating on the impermanence and flaws of the body of the opposite sex is a relatively common practice within Buddhist monasticism. Because such reflections were mostly authored by men they tend to reflect on the faults of the female body, which Tenzin Choedon explains does not justify an inherent inferiority of the female body. Therefore, she uses the interpretation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and her own analysis to conclude that there are no inherent gender differences in Buddhism, because all bodies are ephemeral and made of flesh.

Because of her mastery of the English language, Tenzin Choeni was perhaps the most articulate about gender in Tibetan Buddhism. She explains, “When I study Buddhist philosophy, I study as oh, I am a human, and I have lot of negative emotions which gives lot of pain, and I study how to get rid of them. I almost forget that I am a woman. When I meet a woman or a man, I see them as first as a human, like me.” For Tenzin Choeni, like Tenzin Choedon, Buddhism has taught her to focus on the commonalities of the human experience in her life, as opposed to emphasizing impermanent and insubstantial gender differences. When asked about the idea that gender is a social construct empty of meaning, Tenzin Choeni responded by saying that the Buddha was absolutely clear that the potential for *Nirvana* is in all beings, regardless of gender, class or any other differences.

Furthermore, she explains that in her own experience she is so immersed in her study that she often loses track of her own gender identity: “When I am in the nunnery I sometimes forget that I am woman... I feel like a human.” Here her choice of words is especially poignant. Tenzin Choeni finds gender irrelevant and obsolete within the confines of the nunnery, which is compounded by her monastic robes and shaved head. Like Champa

Dechen, as Tenzin Choeni slowly cultivates the mind of enlightenment aspects of her selfhood begin to fade. Once again, it is only when she leaves the nunnery that she becomes aware once more of her female body. For Tenzin Choeni, the gendered meanings assigned to male and female bodies are real only because society gives them meaning, but gender is not real in that it represents something inherent or essential about a human being. The complex ways that the nuns of Dolma Ling negotiate their own gender from within a Buddhist context are truly fascinating.

Moreover, regardless of the precise ways the nuns of Dolma Ling articulate gender difference between nuns and laywomen, nuns and monks, and their own gender as it relates to Buddhism, they all have decidedly positive views about their capabilities as spiritual actors. Champa Dechen explains that some nuns used to feel they were not as smart as monks: “In their mind they did not feel they could do it [higher education].” However, now she thinks that nuns are fully competent because she has learned how to perform Tara *puja*, has completed advanced readings, and is a proficient writer. Champa Dechen spoke of her accomplishments with a proud sense of achievement: “Now I can do everything.” In her interview, Kelsang Lhamo also affirmed the spiritual capacities of women. She explains, “Yeah, we can [attain enlightenment]. It is about our mind, not about the body. If we can change our mind then we can go as enlightened, that is my thought.” Kelsang Lhamo believes that if nuns cultivate *bodhicitta*, the mind of enlightenment, then their corporeal form has no relevance in this regard. Even though Tenzin Yetga believes that women are often prone to distractions, she has absolutely no questions about their abilities to attain *Nirvana*: “Enlightenment, being in woman body, yes! Why not? Yes!” This further demonstrates that even though some nuns may hold beliefs about gender differences in

general, they may not necessarily relate these disadvantages to their own spiritual capacities. Moreover, every nun I met affirmed the model of soteriological inclusiveness, in that if female practitioners are qualified spiritual actors they can achieve enlightenment. Not one of my informants mentioned the necessity of the doctrine of sexual transformation for enlightenment.

Many scholars such as Karma Lekshe Tsomo discuss the need of female Buddhist practitioners for improved images of the feminine in Buddhist scriptures. In Tibetan Buddhism, two such figures include the *dākinī* and Tara (Tibetan: *rje btsun sgrol ma*), an esteemed female savior bodhisattva. While Tara is one of the most venerable and widely worshiped “deities” in Tibetan Buddhism for both men and women, she holds particular significance for female practitioners.¹⁴⁰ For many nuns at Dolma Ling Tara affirms both the immateriality of gender and the possibility of female enlightenment. Tenzin Choeni uses the strength and intelligence of Tara in Tibetan scriptures as a justification for female enlightenment: “Yes women can do enlightenment, like Tara, you know, she [attained] enlightenment in a woman’s body. She does much good.”

Moreover, Tenzin Choedon uses Tara to explain the emptiness of phenomena such as gender: “Tara said man and womans [are] really not in scripture. But man and woman [are] only names and the outside [appearance]... It has nothing [to do with] low and high [births], it doesn’t matter. Tara said no meaning, only name. I am very believe to Tara. It is good.” Here Tara functions for Tenzin Choedon in a similar way as the goddess from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, discussed in the first chapter, in that she deconstructs assumptions of women as incapable of enlightenment and beliefs about the inherence of gender distinctions. Figures such as the *dākinī* and Tara function to affirm a female soteriology. Furthermore, these

¹⁴⁰ Havnevik, 33.

figures also emphasize the Buddhist doctrines of emptiness and non-dualism, in that they problematize traditional understandings of the substantiality of gender in terms of Tibetan society and the practice of Buddhism. In these ways, moreover, Tibetan nuns are negotiating their own (lack of) gender within Tibetan society and Buddhism. They are not only asserting their own capabilities as female monastics, but are also navigating a place for female soteriology, and therefore female practitioners, within Tibetan Buddhism.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to explore the ways in which Tibetan nuns in exile actively negotiate their understanding of Buddhist doctrine and their experiences with the Tibetan laity in order to interpret the intersection of their own gender and monasticism. The gender of the nuns at Dolma Ling has been very concretely shaped by the gendered meanings of the society in which they were raised, and by their own transformative gendered monastic experiences. A nun's gender is informed by the nature of her renunciation, her ties to and views of the householder life, her views on the social standing of women and the opportunities available for them, her opinions of her female body and its status in the hierarchy of rebirth, and the spiritual capacities of women, especially as they relate to laymen and monks.

The personal experiences of the nuns at Dolma Ling have shown that gender has had a variety of meanings and influences on their lives. This research has begun to unfold a new understanding of gender in the context of Tibetan nuns and the Tibetan community at large. The unique perspectives of the Tibetan nuns interviewed have shaped this research, formulating broad conceptions of the meaning of gender. I was challenged to interpret gender from within a Tibetan context, excavating the gendered meanings within Tibetan nuns' lives, and pulling out moments in their lay and monastic experiences, such as renunciation, that have been influential in shaping their female identities. These moments shed light on the ways contemporary Tibetan nuns have reconciled Buddhist gender prescriptions with Tibetan lay beliefs about the nature of womanhood.

For some nuns, being a woman has little to do with their monastic experience, and even less to do with their spiritual progress. Nuns like Champa Dechen view gender as a

mostly empty phenomenon. The further she travels on the Buddhist path, the deeper her mind and her understandings of reality unfold, and the more irrelevant constructs like gender become in her life. That gender is either immaterial, or simply irrelevant, for nuns like Champa Dechen, is a testament to their monastic practice in that they are committed to nonattachment to components of their selfhood such as gender. As Tenzin Choedon explained, a monastic has more time to dedicate to study than a layperson, and therefore is able to cultivate right mind and deeper understanding, which prevent suffering. In this way, some nuns are able to cultivate nonattachment to impermanent constructions, deeply informing how they view their gender, bodies, and lives.

Other nuns struggle with the realities of their female bodies, such as menstruation, which sometimes hinder their abilities to stay diligent and focused in their studies. A number of nuns believe that difficulties such as menstruation and childbirth for laywomen are some reasons why being female is considered a lower rebirth. They see the life of a woman, especially a laywoman, as full of *samsara* and challenges to the Buddhist path. The gender of these nuns is shaped by biological, cultural, and social constructions, often making them more aware of their bodies as markedly female, and therefore different from and sometimes inferior to men. For these nuns, monasticism is a way of counteracting the inherent suffering of womanhood and improving their *karma* for future rebirths.

Even within Dolma Ling Nunnery, myriad opinions of gender prevail. Each nun has her own history, complete with stories of renunciation, ordination, transformation, and often liberation, with monasticism affording her the invaluable opportunities for higher education and Buddhist practice.¹⁴¹ While the nuns of Dolma Ling are shaped by their different histories and monastic experiences, holding a plethora of beliefs about their gender and

¹⁴¹ For more on the individual biographies of the nuns interviewed see appendices.

womanhood, they are united in their dedication to female monasticism, which was for every nun I spoke with the cause for their daily humility and happiness.

In returning back to the discrepancies between religious ideology and social realities, which has been the crux of this thesis, Hanna Havnevik sheds light on the incongruity between what many Tibetan Buddhists think (universal enlightenment) and what they do (maintain the inferiority of Tibetan nuns). Havnevik proposes that these tensions constitute the potential for change within Tibetan society, as they expose the negotiation of contradicting ideologies. The tension between doctrine and praxis exemplifies the ways in which ideologies are fluid and mutable. Moreover, similar tensions exist within Buddhism as well. On the one hand, Buddhism has functioned as the basis for negative views towards women, arguing for the need of sexual transformation for enlightenment and upholding the widely-accepted Eight Heavy Rules. On the other hand, however, the Buddhist sutras contain stories of soteriological inclusiveness, doctrines such as impermanence and *Tathāgatagarbha* (claiming the potential for enlightenment exists inside all living beings), and figures of female enlightenment such as the *dākinī*, which have all been used to support the capabilities of female practitioners from within a Buddhist context.

In chapter one, we also saw how doctrines such as sexual transformation helped Buddhism gradually move toward soteriological inclusiveness. Therefore, it is possible for doctrinal views and prescriptions to change over time. Similarly, structures such as the monastic hierarchy have existed in Tibet for centuries, and will not disappear overnight. Instead, as the situation of Tibetan nuns in exile opens up new opportunities for nuns to prove their intelligence and capabilities to the broader Tibetan society, their social standing and access to resources continue to improve. While philosophical debate for nuns was

unheard of thirty years ago, nuns at Dolma Ling now debate every day, and inter-nunnery debate sessions such as Jang Gonchoe exist for nuns in exile. As nuns prove their capabilities, hopefully gaining full ordination at some point in the future, they will disprove outdated stereotypes and begin to make a place for themselves within the ranks of monastic leadership.

Realities for Tibetan nuns in Tibet and exile are changing every day. This thesis has attempted to show that the experiences of Tibetan nuns are not always dismal, but are rather as dynamic and multifarious as the Tibetan nuns themselves. Especially in exile, Tibetan nuns are gaining increasing visibility and recognition within the lay community and internationally, with programs such as the Tibetan Nuns Project and Skyadhita. Moreover, Tibetan nuns are actively shaping their own monastic opportunities, engaging in debate, working creatively to generate income for their nunneries, and participating in dialogue about their own ordination. While nunneries such as Dolma Ling are few and far between, they serve as a model for other nunneries in Tibet and exile to follow suite. As the nuns flourish and excel at astounding rates they are a beacon of joy and accomplishment within an often disheartened exile community; we may look to the future for a time when their full potential as, *geshes*, teachers, leaders, and monastics will be realized.

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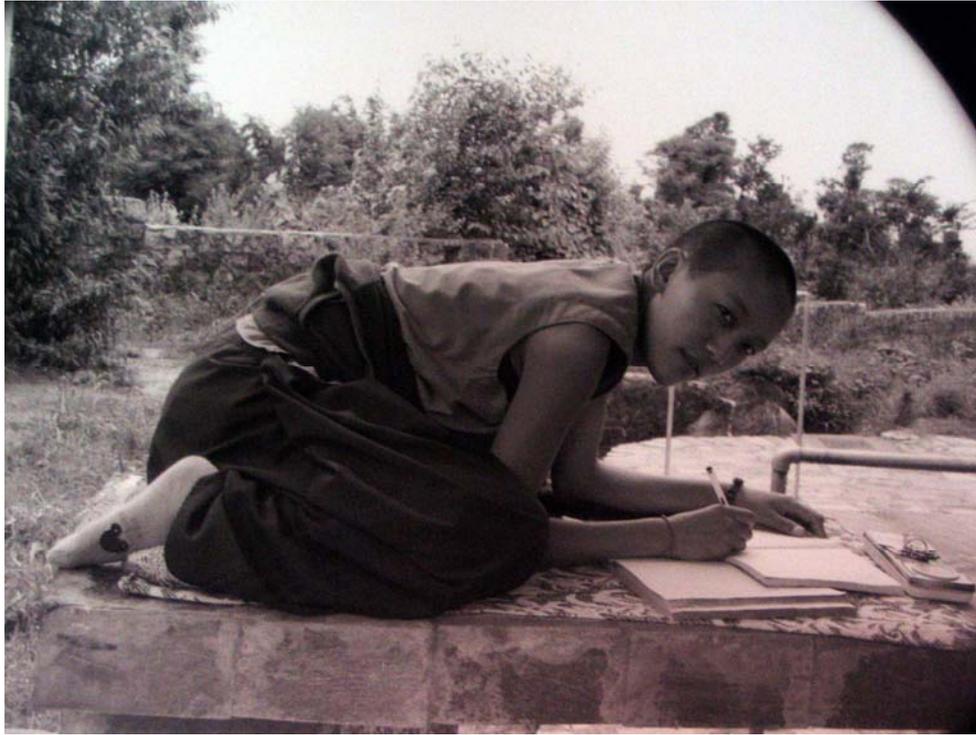
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Appendices



Photograph of a Dolma Ling nun studying. Courtesy of the Tibetan Nuns' Project.

A. List of Interviews

- ❖ Interview with Champa Dechen. April 26, 2008, 8:00pm.
- ❖ Interview with Tenzin Droma. April 29, 2008, 10:15am.
- ❖ Interview with Karma Tsomo. April 29, 2008, 11:00am.
- ❖ Interview with Tenzin Yetga. April 29, 2008, 11:15am.
- ❖ Interview with Kelsang Lhamo. April 29, 2008, 11:45am.
- ❖ Interview with Tenzin Choedon. April 29, 2008, 12:00pm.
- ❖ Interview with Sherab Sangmo. April 29, 2008, 1:00pm.
- ❖ Interview with Tenzin Choeni. April 29, 2008, 1:30pm.
- ❖ Interview with Tsering Yangpal. May 1, 2008, 8:00pm.
- ❖ Discussion with Rinchen Khando Choegyal. May 6, 2008, 2:30pm.
- ❖ Discussion with Hubert Decler. March 14, 2008, 3:00pm.

B. Biographies of Rinchen Khando Choegyal and the Nuns of Dolma Ling

Rinchen Khando Choegyal: *Rinchen Khando Choegyal is the Director of the Tibetan Nun's Project, as well as the former Minister of Education in the Tibetan Government in Exile, and the first President of the Tibetan Women's Association. She is married to Ngari Rinpoche, the youngest brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. She has dedicated her life to the Tibetan Nuns' Project, and continues to do spectacular work improving the lives of nuns through immaculate facilities, healthcare and most importantly, a well-rounded, high-level monastic education.*

Champa Dechen: *Champa Dechen, now 28 years old, was born in Lhasa, Tibet. She became a nun at 11 years old, and left Tibet for India in 1999. Life as a nun appealed to Champa Dechen because it seemed peaceful and because of the opportunities available to study Buddhism. Her parents were supportive of her decision to become a nun, as she also has 2 brothers who are monks and one sister who is a nun.*

Tenzin Droma: *Tenzin Droma became a nun 20 years ago, at age 11. She lived in Tibet with family, until she went on pilgrimage to Nepal with parents, where she became a nun. She explained that her parents were happy with the decision, the same as if she became a monk.*

Karma Tsomo: *Karma Tsomo was born in Kinnaur, in Northern India. She became a nun at age 10. Currently 27, she recalls that from a early age she knew that she did not want to live the life of a layperson.*

Tenzin Yetga: *Tenzin Yetga was born in Ladakh, India . She attended school until the 11th standard, at which she did secretarial work for almost 3 years. At this point, not wanting to get married, Tenzin Yetga began seriously considering becoming a nun, given her strong interest in Buddhism. She explained that it felt natural to become a nun, which she did in 2002, in Dharamsala, India. She has currently been a nun at Dolma Ling for 4 years.*

Kelsang Lhamo: *Kelsang Lhamo was born in Ladakh, India. At 13 years of age she became a nun, and had wanted to be a nun since childhood. She came to Dolma Ling to dedicate her life to the practice of Buddhism, and is currently 19 years old.*

Tenzin Choedon: *Tenzin Choedon was born in Tibet. She became a nun in 1989, when she was 12 years old. With her parents' approval, she left Tibet to attend Dolma Ling. She is currently 33 years old, and has been a nun for over 20 years.*

Sherab Sangmo: *Sherab Sangmo is from Kinnaur, India and went to Trilokpur to become a nun at age 12. She came to Dolma Ling in 2000, and has been a nun for 12 years.*

Tenzin Choeni: *Tenzin Choeni was born in Ladakh, although her parents are from Tibet. She has always had a strong interest in Buddhist Philosophy, and after her graduation from Delhi University, she decided to study Philosophy on her own as a laywoman. Finally at age 25, 3 years ago, she found Dolma Ling and decided to become ordained so that she could dedicate her life to study.*

Tsering Yangpal: *Tsering Yangpal is from Kham, Tibet. She became a nun at 9 years old, at the wishes of her parents, while in Tibet. She then spent 8 years as an ordained nun living with her family, before coming to Dolma Ling in 1998. She is currently 27 years old.*