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Hanna Havnevik  
Tibetan Buddhist Nuns

*To the brave nuns in Tibet,  
who fearlessly fight to regain the  
independence of their country.*

Hanna Havnevik

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Tibetan Buddhist  
Nuns

History, Cultural Norms and  
Social Reality

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# Abbreviations

BA	<i>Blue Annals</i>
CRCA	Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs of H.H. the Dalai Lama
LTWA	Library of Tibetan Works and Archives
NIBWA	<i>Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities</i>
TB	<i>Tibetan Bulletin</i>
TN	<i>Tibetan Nuns</i>
TTJ	<i>The Tibet Journal</i>
TR	<i>Tibetan Review</i>
TVS	<i>The Vajradhatu Sun</i>



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## Preface

There has been very little documentation on Tibetan nuns and their practice of Buddhism. Therefore, I am very glad that Mrs. Hanna Havnevik has done extensive studies and is now presenting her findings in *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns*.

Presently in Tibet, Lhasa and its surrounding areas are under martial law imposed by China. The Tibetans have staged several peaceful demonstrations in which nuns have also taken a very active part. This book will provide insight into the lives of these brave nuns, who would rather risk their lives than lose their freedom and the right to practice their religion.

I wish Mrs. Havnevik every success with her book.

Kesang Y. Takla (Mrs.)  
Representative of  
His Holiness the Dalai Lama



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## Introduction

Since the early era of Buddhism, an Order of nuns has existed alongside the Order of monks. In the Theravāda tradition, the lineage of fully ordained nuns (*bhikṣuṇī*) has been broken, and thus women inclined to devote their lives to religion undertake extended lay vows or the vows of a novice. In some Mahāyāna countries the full ordination for women has been maintained, and the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination can today be obtained in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and in some overseas Chinese communities. In Tibet, the full ordination for women, if it ever existed at all, was broken at some time. Women have, however, all through the Buddhist world, continued to take extended lay vows or the vows of a novice and lived as nuns, many of them in organized monastic communities.

### 1.1. The Literature

The Buddhist literature gives little account of nuns participating in intellectual life, and hardly any surviving texts have been authored by nuns. A history of the Order of nuns either has not survived or was never written. Nevertheless, it is possible to piece together a picture of the life and position of Buddhist nuns and laywomen. Relatively comprehensive studies on the position of women as reflected in Buddhist literature have already been carried out. In a pioneering work, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism* (1930), I. B. Horner studied how women were viewed in the oldest Buddhist texts. All later students of women in Buddhism are greatly indebted to her. The portrayal of women in Buddhist literature and the conditions for nuns in Buddhism have also been studied by Nancy Falk in the articles “An Image of Woman in Old Buddhist Literature” (1974) and “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The

Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism” (1980), and by Janice D. Willis in “Nuns and Benefactresses” (1985). There has been an increasing interest in the *Vinaya* rules for nuns. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh has written *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* (1984), and Jotiya Dhirasekera has published the article “The Disciplinary Code Of The Bhikkhunīs” (1985).

In *Women in Buddhism; Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (1979), Diana M. Paul has analysed how Mahāyāna texts describe women. Nancy Schuster has published two articles dealing with the portrayal of women in Mahāyāna texts: “Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some *Mahāratnakūṭasūtras*” (1981) and “Yoga-Master Dharmamitra and Clerical Misogyny in Fifth Century Buddhism” (1984). Nancy Schuster has also written a very interesting article about the image of women and the life of nuns in early Chinese Buddhism: “Striking a Balance: Women and Images of Women in Early Chinese Buddhism” (1985). Yuichi Kajiyama has written an article that deals with how women were conceived in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna literature: “Women in Buddhism” (1982). J. Willis has taken interest in the daily life of nuns in the Tibetan tradition: “Tibetan Ani-s: The Nuns’ Life in Tibet,” and finally Martin Brauen gives an overview of the portrayal of woman and the female in different epochs of Buddhism: “Die Frau und das Weibliche im Buddhismus” (1981).

This historical-textual research has revealed some very interesting facts about the portrayal and conditions of women under different epochs of Buddhism. Anthropologists and sociologically oriented scholars doing fieldwork in Buddhist societies, on the other hand, have paid much attention to the monks and their monasteries, while the life of the nun has until recently been almost totally ignored. In works on Theravāda Buddhism by S. J. Tambiah (1970), Melford E. Spiro (1967, 1971), and Richard F. Gombrich (1971), references to nuns are very fragmentary and relegated to the footnotes. Among anthropologists studying Mahāyāna Buddhist culture, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf has made a few references to a community of nuns in his book *The Sherpas of Nepal, Buddhist Highlanders* (1964), and he has written an article “A Nunnery in Nepal” (1976), where he describes some aspects of the life of Sherpa nuns. Until the 1980’s women anthropologists working in Tibetan Buddhist communities largely ig-

nored Tibetan women. Barbara N. Aziz has written a short article "Ani Chodon: Portrait of a Buddhist Nun" (1976), while nuns and nunneries are only occasionally mentioned in her monograph *Tibetan Frontier Families* (1978). In a special issue of *The Tibet Journal* (1987) on Women and Tibet, she discusses the situation of Tibetan women in the article "Moving Towards a Sociology of Tibet," and recently her paper "Women in Tibetan Society and Tibetology" (1988) was published. In *Sherpas through their Rituals* (1978), Sherry B. Ortner hardly mentions Sherpa nuns, but in 1983 she published an article about the founding of the first Sherpa nunnery: "The Founding of the First Sherpa Nunnery, and the Problem of 'Women' as an Analytic Category."

Although the tradition of "going forth as nuns" has survived in one form or another in most Buddhist cultures, the fact that very little has been written about nuns by historians of religion or by anthropologists, stirred my interest in the subject. The reason for choosing nuns in Tibetan Buddhism was motivated by the fact that even though the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination does not exist in the Tibetan religious tradition, the tradition of women taking the novice ordination and living in nunneries is well established. In exile, a few Tibetan nunneries have been re-established, and one of them has been easily accessible for field-studies.

## 1.2. Theoretical Framework

The position of women varies from society to society and has changed throughout history. To understand Buddhist women in a particular social setting, it is important to study the local culture, but also to adopt a broader historical perspective, so as to see which factors in the long history of Buddhism that can explain the life and the position of Buddhist women today. Melford Spiro expresses it thus:

Although textual, i.e., normative, Buddhist doctrine poses a serious challenge to most of our generalizations about religion, and ultimately to our very notions about human nature itself, modern anthropologists (and other social scientists) who study the beliefs and rituals of practicing Buddhists, have with some few exceptions ignored the normative sources from which they derive, and since frequently the former bear little resemblance to the latter, the challenge posed by normative Buddhism has seldom been confronted. This is a pity, for Buddhism after

all is not the creation of contemporary Buddhists, but a religion with deep historical roots. (1971:4)

There is thus a gap between philological-historical and sociologically oriented Buddhist studies. Like M. Spiro, I find it necessary to combine these different approaches to give an adequate picture of the nun in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. On the one hand, I will present a survey of attitudes towards women in different epochs of Buddhism and a short historical account of the establishment and the functioning of the Order of nuns. This presentation will be based on the philological-historical research that has already been carried out. This will give a background for understanding the way of life of nuns in the traditional Tibetan setting and in exile. Historical data, based on interviews with Tibetan refugees and on scattered written sources, will also be used in trying to give a picture of the distribution and functioning of Tibetan nunneries, and of accomplished nuns and *yoginīs*. I will use more sociologically oriented methods in investigating how general Buddhist and in particular Tibetan Buddhist ideals about women affect the life and self-conception of Tibetan nuns today. By ideals and attitudes concerning women, I refer to how these are expressed in normative Buddhism, that is in the texts that the tradition considers as authoritative, and how religious specialists and lay people interpret these norms today.

When studying the interconnections between cultural norms and actual behaviour, it is important to distinguish between two levels of social life. The lack of precise definitions of these terms has led to much confusion in anthropological literature. Traditional functionalist theory has failed to distinguish between jural rules and moral norms prescribing behaviour, on the one hand, and the actual behaviour itself, on the other. Ideological systems were seen as mirroring social structure, the two levels of social life mutually reinforcing each other and bringing about social harmony.

Influenced by Parsons and Shils (1951), Clifford Geertz sees religion as belonging to the realm of culture. He states:

One of the more useful ways – but far from the only one – of distinguishing between culture and social system is to see the former as an ordered system of meaning and of symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place; and to see the latter as the pattern of social interaction itself. (1957:33)

C. Geertz warns against the static functionalist view of society, and he sees the main motivation for change as:

the dynamic elements in social change which arise from the failure of cultural patterns to be perfectly congruent with forms of social organization. (Ibid.:33)

Functionalist theory could not grasp processes of change in societies partly because it never allowed for the agent of change, the actor. A helpful tool for understanding social change and the complex interaction between the cultural and the social order, is the transactional model developed by Fredrik Barth (1966). This model is based on the assumption that people act rationally, in trying to reach their goals, which can be either material or spiritual. When several people choose to act according to new values, new structural forms (rules and norms) are generated that legitimize the new way of behaving. There is thus a continual feedback process between peoples' actions (social organization), structural forms (rules and norms), and cultural values.

Recent feminist oriented anthropologists take the same point of departure when they state that women are too often seen in the anthropological literature as solely shaped by their environment. Instead it is suggested that:

women are social actors, with goals of their own, and means to achieve them. (Susan C. Rogers, 1978:137-138)

It might be useful to discuss Tibetan nuns and their relation to Buddhist norms concerning women from this analytic viewpoint. A hypothesis underlying my study is thus that Buddhist nuns do not passively adjust to religious norms, but that they can play an active part in maintaining or changing them while trying to realize their religious and secular goals.

### 1.3. The Collection of Data

The part of my thesis relating to Buddhist attitudes and norms towards women and nuns in particular, is based upon a study of relevant Buddhist texts (translated into English), as well as secondary literature, referred to above, discussing these norms. Buddhist textual or normative views of the feminine are in varying degrees



part of cultural beliefs, i.e. how religious specialists and lay people picture women.

To investigate daily life and religious practice in a nunnery and the values and norms concerning women that are still held among Tibetans, I spent seven months doing research in Tibetan refugee settlements in northern India.

Part of the time was spent in Dharamsala, studying historical documents at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives and interviewing local Tibetans. I formally interviewed eighteen Tibetans concerning historical data regarding nunneries, famous nuns and also concerning their own attitudes towards ordinary nuns. My informants were picked at random among lay people and religious specialists of both sexes. These informants do not constitute a representative sample of the exile Tibetan population; rather they were chosen as informants because they were believed to have knowledge about the life and the position of nuns in Tibet as well as in exile. Otherwise, information was gathered by informal conversations with a number of Tibetans and western lay people and monastics. As for historical data concerning nunneries and nuns in Tibet, I have used the names of most of my informants, as I think this will make it easier for other scholars to pursue further investigation in the field. When it comes to somewhat controversial statements about attitudes, prejudice etc. as concerns nuns, I have omitted the names of informants.

The formal interviews were carried out with the help of interpreters, as my knowledge of Tibetan is restricted to simple conversation. Tashi Tsering, working as research assistant at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, has been very helpful in making arrangements with informants, in assisting as interpreter and in supplementing historical data about nuns in Tibet. Besides the formal interviews, my data on the situation of nuns in exile are based on informal discussions with Tibetan and western nuns.

About three months were spent doing fieldwork in Karma Drubgyu Targye Ling, an exile Kagyupa nunnery situated at Tilokpur, about one and a half hours' ride by bus from Dharamsala. I chose this particular nunnery for several reasons: there are only two exile nunneries in the area, and the Tilokpur Nunnery was the first one to be established; one of the nuns staying there, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, has very good knowledge of English and when time allowed, she assisted as interpreter; and finally the

nuns could readily make accommodation for a foreigner wishing to study their monastic life.

While in the nunnery, data were collected mainly by participant observation and by informal discussions with key informants. I did not experience my role in the nunnery as problematic, since several western buddhists had visited it before, and stayed for shorter or longer periods. My informants all the time knew the objective of my inquiries, that I was interested in writing about the socio-cultural situation of Tibetan nuns, and that I was interested in learning more about their religious practices.

There has been much discussion in the field of social science about the validity of qualitative data, widely used by social anthropologists, compared to sociological survey techniques. Qualitative data are obtained through participant observation and through talks with key informants, with whom the scholar spends much time. Quantitative data, on the contrary, are gathered among a large and representative sample of informants, who give their responses on readymade questionnaires. Many anthropologists maintain that the survey method is of limited use in foreign societies, where language and different worldviews create barriers between the scholar and the informant. Edmund Leach has discussed the two methods in the article "An Anthropologist's Reflections on a Social Survey," where he maintains:

it is in the very nature of questionnaire investigation, that the 'results' tend to err in the direction of ideal stereotypes. Hence any attempt to investigate, by questionnaire research, the degree of fit between an ideal stereotype and actual practice is a waste of time. (1967:85)

Few anthropologists would, however, be as opposed to the use of statistical methods as E. Leach, and today, when anthropologists tend to work in more complex societies, there is a trend towards combining qualitative and quantitative research.<sup>1</sup> The question of using quantitative methods in my fieldwork among nuns was not encountered, since the nunnery was established within the confines of an Indian village, and the nearest Tibetan lay community was situated about twenty miles away. I did, however, experience differences between formal interviews and casual talk with key informants. Informants interviewed formally tended to give an idealized portrayal of the position of nuns. It was only after staying in the field for some time, through participant observation

and through intimate friendships, that I came to know more about the actual situation of Tibetan nuns. I found formal interviews to be very helpful as concerns historical data, attitudes and cultural mores, but less useful regarding the actual social situation of nuns.

One of the shortcomings of this study is that I did not have the opportunity to study the interaction between nuns and Tibetan lay people, although a few Tibetans visited the nunnery during my stay there. Data concerning the interaction between lay people and nuns is therefore based upon interviews, and upon observations of contact between nuns and lay people in Dharamsala, where I stayed for about two and a half months. I also visited the nunnery in Dharamsala on several occasions, and through interviews, casual talks and sporadic observation I was able to get an impression of the position of the nuns here.

During my stay in India, I also paid a brief visit to Ridzong Monastery and the affiliated nunnery Culican in Ladakh. For two weeks, during the New Year celebration, I stayed in the Tibetan Bonpo community in Dolanji, where I interviewed three Bonpo nuns and observed and obtained information about their lives in the community. I also visited several Tibetan refugee settlements in Kangra, especially Tashi Jong, Sherab Ling and Bir, where nuns are living independently or with their families, while having extended contacts with the lamas in the respective communities.

The approach of my study of nuns in Tibetan Buddhism may be termed multimethodological, since I have made use of historical and anthropological methods. Historical studies have provided the background for understanding the situation of Buddhist nuns today, and while living among Tibetan nuns and lay people I have obtained information about the actual way of life of Tibetan Buddhist nuns, and about the specific cultural environment that they live in.

#### 1.4. System of Transcription

There exist about a dozen different systems of transcription of Tibetan into Roman script. To make it easier for the reader not familiar with Tibetan, I will give Tibetan terms in phonetic transcription and a complete list of Tibetan names and terms in orthographic transcription on pp. 219–230. The phonetic rendering does not follow any specific system. I have tried to keep it close to

Tibetan pronunciation without deviating too much from the Tibetan spelling. I find the standard system of orthographic transcription described by Turrell V. Wylie<sup>2</sup> to be practical in use, since it leaves out diacritical marks. When it comes to capitalization, this is not practiced in Tibetan. To conform to the English language, however, I will use internal capitalization of proper names. Thus the Tibetan name Wangmo will be transliterated dBang-mo.

ka	kha	ga	nga
ca	cha	ja	nya
ta	tha	da	na
pa	pha	ba	ma
tsa	tsha	dza	
wa	zha	za	'a
ya	ra	la	
sha	sa	ha	a

---

## Women in Buddhist Literature

### 2.1. Ancient Indian Views on Women

The social situation of Indian women was changed only gradually in the course of Indian history. The late Vedic and the classical periods (roughly 500 BC to 500 AD) are important for understanding the situation of women in Buddhism. Both late Vedic and Brahmanical texts, as well as later texts produced by the Hindu tradition, give important information about the socio-cultural position of women in Buddhism. Although Buddhism in many ways was a reaction to the religious and social institutions of Brahmanism, Buddhist texts perpetuated contemporary attitudes and portrayals of women.

In Vedic times, women seem to have had a relatively independent position, compared to their position in Brahmanism. They could study until their marriage or continue educating themselves in the sacred texts. Both men and women could get religious education and it was not uncommon for Vedic women to be religious teachers. Nevertheless, it was as a wife that a woman achieved her greatest religious purpose, that of performing sacrifices together with her husband.<sup>1</sup> However, the position of women was gradually to decline in classical times.

In classical Indian culture, women were seen as lustful and erotic. In some texts it is stated that women cannot be held responsible for their actions because it is so difficult for them to control themselves.<sup>2</sup>

There are numerous passages in Brahmanical and later texts describing the lustful, envious, sly, and unreliable nature of women. There are other texts, e.g. the *Kāmasūtra*, praising the art of love-making and the erotic skills of mistresses. Woman's supposedly erotic nature was feared by ascetics, who felt threatened by it, but praised by young *kṣatriya* men who could indulge in erotic play with their mistresses.<sup>3</sup> Thus there are two opposing trends in In-

dian culture. On the one hand, the Indian woman was despised because of her lustful nature, and on the other, the role of the mother is highly praised. In fact, motherhood had sacred connotations in Indian culture.<sup>4</sup> At the time when Buddhism was taking root in Indian society, the Indian woman received her worth first and foremost as a mother of sons and as a housewife.

## 2.2. The Portrayal of Women in Theravāda Literature

To obtain information about women in Buddhism, starting from the early Hīnayāna tradition, one has to depend on the religious texts that the tradition has produced, i.e. the canonical texts, the *Tipiṭaka*, (*Vinaya Piṭaka*, *Sutta Piṭaka*, and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*) written in Pāli. Information about women in the early era of Buddhism is also found in the *Jātakas*, the 550 “birth-tales” about the previous lives of the Buddha. In the *Milindapañha*, the life of Buddhist laywomen is depicted.

The Pāli *Tipiṭaka* was not put into writing until maybe 200 years or more after the death of the Buddha, implying a long oral tradition which might have distorted some facts about women’s lives in the early days of Buddhism. According to I. B. Horner, the texts were written at a time when the position of women in India had deteriorated as compared to the Buddha’s time.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Buddhist literature was mainly written by men, by a religious elite educated in the monasteries and Buddhist universities. We are thus presented with a male view of the female.

As the canonical Buddhist texts were produced exclusively by monks, some of the conceptions of women in the texts may only have been representative for this religious elite, but it is also likely that some of these ideas made an impact on the lives and the thinking of ordinary women and men. Generally ideals and views put forth as authoritative by a religious tradition, have an impact on the lives and the self-image of women, as well as on general attitudes towards the female sex formed in society.

Hardly any writings by women have survived. There is only one collection of poems, the *Therīgāthā*, claimed to have been written by the *therīs*, the nun elders. An historical account of the Order of nuns either has not survived or was never written.

Buddhism inherited many pan-Indian ideas about the female

sex. These ideas centered upon the feminine seen as a physical and sensual power in the universe. A common theme in Indian mythology is the erotic goddess who tempts the male ascetic, e.g. Pārvatī who tempts Shiva while he is meditating in the Himalayas. In Buddhist literature the same theme is found, especially in the form of Māra who tries to tempt the meditating Buddha with his three daughters, Rāgā, Aratī and Tṛṣṇā, the personifications of what the Indians conceived to be the chief qualities of women, namely lust, aversion, and craving.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.3. The Establishment of the Order of Nuns

What I. B. Horner calls the “emancipation of women” at the time of the Buddha, is closely linked with the establishment of the Order of nuns.

During the first years of Buddhism there was a group of women lay disciples. The Order of *bhikkhunīs*, however, was established in Kapilavatthu five years after the Buddha attained Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> It is recorded that at first women were not allowed to start their own Order. Ānanda, one of the most trusted monks in the Order, is reported to have requested the Buddha three times on behalf of his female lay followers, among them Mahāpajāpatī, the aunt of Gotama, and the Buddha finally gave in.

The initial unwillingness to ordain nuns was based on women’s role in procreation and in maintaining the household. In a society that placed high value on women as mothers, one might expect some opposition against the idea of celibacy for women. Furthermore, considering the Indian conception of women as sexually uncontrolled, it is likely that women ascetics were perceived as a threat, because they could easily lure monks into breaking their vows of celibacy.

Gotama was brought up in a *kṣatriya* family that held traditional values concerning women, and this might help to explain why he hesitated in setting up the Order of nuns. The fact that the Order was opened for women, however, was a great concession, in that they were given the same opportunities for salvation as men.

The ordination of nuns was made on the condition that they accepted eight additional rules for *bhikkhunīs* laid down by Gotama.<sup>8</sup> These rules show that the Order of nuns was not meant

to be autonomous. The nuns were dependent upon the monks for carrying out some of their most important ceremonies. They had to make confession to both *saṅghas*, which was not required of the monks. The nuns were supposed to be deferential towards monks; thus a hundred year old nun should greet even a newly ordained monk. Nuns were never to criticize the monks, but the monks were free to admonish the nuns.

A boy or a girl could enter the Buddhist Order at the age of eight.<sup>9</sup> Novice monks and nuns were both subject to the same ten rules (*daśa śikṣāpada*). However, before asking for the complete *bhikkhunī* ordination, nuns had to study and be trained in six rules for two years. E. Lamotte states that the probational period was required for girls under twenty years of age, and for women who had been married for more than twelve years. The six rules corresponded to the first six rules of the novice. Monks could be fully ordained when they were twenty years old, without a probational period.<sup>10</sup> While still on probation, a nun could stay with her family, but when she had received the *bhikkhunī* ordination, the Order could claim complete control over her.

Depending on the different schools of Buddhism, the vows of fully ordained nuns and monks vary. According to C. Kabilsingh, there were 290 rules for nuns in the Mahāsāṃghika School, 356 in the Mūlasarvāstivāda School, while the Mahīśāsaka School fixed the number of rules for nuns at 380.<sup>11</sup> About the rules for monks and nuns, E. Lamotte states:

The monks' code consists of more than 220 rules . . . The discipline to which the nun is subjected is stricter than that of the monks. Her regulations consist in principle of five hundred articles, double those of the monks, but in practice their numbers vary between 290 and 355. (1984: 56)

The Buddhist *bhikkhunīs* were sometimes suspected of having opportunistic motives for joining the Order.<sup>12</sup> It was believed that when lay life no longer proved satisfactory, women came to the *saṅgha*. I. B. Horner states, however:

At the time of the inception of the Order and for some time after, it was regarded as perfectly respectable for women to enter upon the homeless life. It was only later that the Order lost its primitive character and became a refuge for the poor, the unsuccessful, the unmarried and the widowed, the entrants being looked upon as unfortunates who



had found life too difficult on account of the fruits of deeds done in former becoming. (1975:172)

Regarding the internal organization of the early Order of nuns, there is some information in the early Buddhist texts. There was a system whereby the elder nuns taught the young ones, who in turn waited upon the older nuns. The nuns were educated in the *Vinaya* and the six rules which were necessary for ordination. A part of the daily life in the Order was to go begging for food in the villages.

The nuns who had the ability were expected to teach the lay people and possibly other nuns in the Dharma,<sup>13</sup> and several nun preachers are mentioned. Possibly the *bhikkhunīs* were not supposed to teach other monks or nuns, but only lay people.<sup>14</sup> Even though several nuns are reported to have been great teachers, they are always depicted as preaching to other women.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, this shows that the nuns were not thought to be as competent as their male counterparts in understanding and expressing the Teaching. Another rule made it an offence for monks to teach the Dharma to women. I.B. Horner thinks that this rule did not have its origin at Buddha's time, but is due to a later interpolation into the *Vinaya*.<sup>16</sup>

Neither could nuns withdraw to lead a solitary life in the forest, as this was prohibited in the *Vinaya*.<sup>17</sup> This rule was made because some nuns had been raped or molested by men while pursuing meditation in lonely places. This prohibition prevented the nuns from practicing meditation on equal terms with monks. The same preachings were, however, given to both monks and nuns,<sup>18</sup> and the *Vinaya* rules show that Gotama expected the same from the nuns as concerned discipline. Equality of status was further expressed in terms of dress, as both monks and nuns were to wear the same robes.<sup>19</sup>

There is no evidence that the Buddha doubted the spiritual capabilities of women. In a conversation with Ānanda, the Buddha stated: "they are capable."<sup>20</sup> The texts show that there were famous nuns,<sup>21</sup> and several nuns are reported to have reached Arhatship.<sup>22</sup> The texts give evidence also of laywomen who became enlightened.<sup>23</sup>

Even though the female *saṅgha* did not play an important role in India after the death of the Buddha, the fact that a separate fe-

male Order was established gave women the possibility of pursuing a religious career and to devote their lives to religious studies and meditation. Women could now lead a life outside the household, which was unthinkable in orthodox Brahmanical society.

## 2.4. Women in Mahāyāna Literature

The Mahāyāna literature varies greatly in its portrayal of the female sex, from the most negative attitude towards women's spiritual potentials, to granting her a religious role equal to that of man's. In Mahāyāna literature, female lay disciples are mentioned more often than nuns. This may be due to the fact that Mahāyāna granted lay people a larger role in religious life. J. Willis states that laywomen played a significant role in supporting and sustaining the Buddhist tradition, as opposed to the nuns, who did not remain a strong factor.<sup>24</sup> The path of the Bodhisattva was open to everyone, including women. Taking care of the household met with more positive attitudes than before, and domestic duties came to be more accepted as being in accordance with women's religious role. It has been suggested that the role of the nun would decline as the position of the laywoman was elevated.<sup>25</sup> This hypothesis, however, is difficult to evaluate, as a thorough study of the social, economic, and religious situation of women in the history of Buddhism has not been carried out.

### 2.4.1. Misogynist Attitudes in Mahāyāna Texts

Certain Mahāyāna texts perpetuate the early Buddhist negative attitudes towards women. In an early Mahāyāna text, the *Ugraparipṛcchāsūtra*, the following is stated:

Toward one's own wife, one should produce three thoughts . . . the thought of a great female wolf, . . . of a shark, of a great female cat. And three more thoughts . . . of a black snake, . . . of a corpse-guarding fish, . . . of snatching away the essential life breath . . . (N. Schuster, 1984:38–39)

In another early Mahāyāna text, the *Strīvivartasūtra*, these statements are made about women:

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 . . . like

a toilet, with nine holes pouring out all sorts of filth. This is the body to which stupid and small men are attached! . . . This body is food for scavenging birds, wolves and dogs and therefore it is thrown away in a cemetery. This body is an assemblage of pain and suffering . . . (N. Schuster, 1984:40)

However, the negative statements about the human body apply equally to male and female. N. Schuster believes that negative attitudes towards women occurred in texts describing meditation practices, specifically in those oriented towards meditation on the impurities of the body. Although the majority of such texts are restricted to techniques for taming the mind, in a few, the authors accuse women instead of the lustful minds of the meditators.<sup>26</sup>

#### 2.4.2. *Enlightenment for Women*

The Mahāyāna literature is ambivalent as concerns the soteriological path open to women. D. Paul classifies the texts into those denying women the opportunity to enter Buddha lands, the majority of the *sūtras* that grant women the role of lower-stage Bodhisattvas, and a few texts that acknowledge that a woman can become an irreversible Bodhisattva, about to attain Buddhahood.<sup>27</sup> According to D. Paul, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* describes women as being capable of being a “good daughter” (*kulaputrī*) and “a good friend” (*kalyāṇamitra*). A “good daughter” is one who has entered upon the path of a Bodhisattva and “the good friends” include Bodhisattvas and persons of virtue who teach the Dharma. A “good daughter” is described as capable of worship, teaching, taking vows, of awakening the Thought of Enlightenment, and of receiving the prediction of Enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> These female categories, however, are always mentioned in connection with their male counterparts, viz. the “good son” or “good (male) friend”. In some textual passages the “good son” is described as having authority over, and helping the “good daughter”.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that woman was seen as capable of entering the path of the Bodhisattva, of teaching the Doctrine, and ultimately of reaching Enlightenment, represented a liberal view of the potentials of women.

In the *Sukhāvātīvyūha*, women are denied the possibility of being born in the land of Amitābha, unless they change their sex. Y. Kajiyama maintains that in contrast to Theravāda texts that

disregarded women's ability for Liberation, in the *Sukhāvativyūha* the Buddhas Amitābha and Akṣobhya were made to express sympathy with the lot of women, Akṣobhya by removing women's suffering, and Amitābha by transforming them into men, upon their entrance to their respective paradises.<sup>30</sup> Tibetan Buddhists argue along the same lines, viz. that women are not debarred from reaching Enlightenment, but that their physical and social suffering makes it desirable for them to be reborn as men.<sup>31</sup>

In Mahāyāna literature relating to women, there is a tension between the traditional misogynist attitudes and the sexual egalitarianism that was later developed. A compromise between these two trends was found by granting women the possibility of becoming a high-stage Bodhisattva or a Buddha, on condition that they changed their sex.

D. Paul maintains that in certain texts the change of sex is described as both a physiological and mental process. Sexuality is primarily seen as a power caused by former *karma* and secondly as sexual characteristics, such as genitals, breasts etc. The sexual power controls the sexual features, and while the sexual power is difficult to change, this is not the case of the physical appearance. In the *Abhidharmakośa* it is stated that the secondary physical characteristics will cease to function when the sexual power is controlled. The feminine sexual power was generally seen as inferior to that of the male, in that women's sexual constitution relegated them to weakness of will and thus hampered their religious growth.<sup>32</sup>

In the *Candrottarādārikāvyaākaraṇasūtra*, after the girl Candrottarā had taken the vows of the Bodhisattva, it was predicted that she would attain Buddhahood, and her sex was thereupon changed. At times the transformation of sex was part of a "rite of truth" (*satyakriyā*). Burlingam defines "the act of truth" as:

a formal declaration of fact, accompanied by a command or resolution or prayer that the purpose of the agent shall be accomplished. (in N. Schuster, 1981:53)

In the *Sumatidārikāparipṛcchā*, the eight year old Sumati performs several acts of truth when Mahāmaudgalyāyana tries to make difficulties for her; she states:

if I am able to carry out the Bodhisattva practices, let the worlds

shake, heavenly flowers rain down and music sound. (N. Schuster, 1981:40)

Sumati performed the rite of truth and was transformed into a thirty year old monk before she received the prediction of Buddhahood.<sup>33</sup>

A few widely read and popular Mahāyāna texts, like the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda*, the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*, and the *Hai-lung-wang ching*, imply that sex is irrelevant for reaching Buddhahood.<sup>34</sup> These texts take up the argument elaborated in Mahāyāna philosophy, that there are two levels of truth, the conditioned (*saṃvṛtisatya*) and the unconditioned (*paramārthasatya*). People with ordinary wisdom see a difference between man and woman, but those who grasp the teaching of Emptiness, understand that this difference is illusory.

In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, a dialog between a goddess and the monk Śāriputra is presented. Śāriputra asks the goddess why she does not change her sex, upon which she answers that there are no innate characteristics of the female sex. To stress her point she changes Śāriputra into a female and herself into a male. She exclaims that the Buddha stated that: “all are not really men or women.”<sup>35</sup> Thereupon, Śāriputra is led to say: “The female form and innate characteristics neither exist nor do not exist.”<sup>36</sup>

Generally, high-stage Bodhisattvas and Buddhas were portrayed as male or as androgynous.<sup>37</sup> Amitābha was seen as both a mother and a father. Irreversible Bodhisattvas were often pictured as warriors, which may account for the fact that they were so seldom portrayed in female form. However, female imagery became increasingly important in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

D. Paul claims that female deities entered the Mahāyāna pantheon at the end of the fourth century.<sup>38</sup> The celestial Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara appeared as the female Kuan-Yin in China. Kuan-Yin was portrayed as a white-clad woman who helped women in childbirth and sailors at sea. Kuan-Yin was introduced to China at the same time as Tantrism, around 600–700 AD. In Indian Tantric Buddhism, Avalokiteśvara had the White Tārā as his consort, and several scholars think that the Chinese fused the two deities, thinking that the White Tārā was a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara. D. Paul stresses that as late as the eighth century Kuan-Yin male images were also present in China. Therefore, Kuan-Yin is

to be perceived as asexual or androgynous, rather than purely female.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.5. Female Symbolism in Tantric Literature

Buddhist Tantrism originated around the sixth century AD. It flourished both in the northwestern and in the northeastern borderlands of classical India. It incorporated both Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements and combined magic, yoga, and devotionism, and the *tantras* may, broadly speaking, be called ritual manuals. The symbolism of the *tantras* is very rich, and differs from one Tantric cycle to the other. The question of female symbolism in the *tantras* has been dealt with by scholars such as David L. Snellgrove: *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study* (1959), Per Kværne: "On the Concept of Sahaja in Indian Buddhist Tantric Literature" (1975), and *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs: A Study of the Caryāgīti* (1977), Alex Wayman: "Female Energy and Symbolism in the Buddhist Tantras" (1962), Martin M. Kalff: "Dākinīs in the Cakrasaṃvara Tradition" (1978), and in the works of M. Eliade (1973), G. Tucci (1980), and R. A. Stein (1972). The following discussion is based upon the works of these scholars.

### 2.5.1. Tantric Ideology: the Philosophical Background

Tantrism adopted the philosophical ideas developed in the Mahāyāna school of Madhyamaka, especially the thought that all phenomenal things are illusive and have no reality of their own. There is a reality which cannot be described, called Emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Thus two levels of truth were postulated, the absolute truth (*paramārthasatya*) that can only be perceived by people of higher cognition, while the relative level of truth (*saṃvṛtisatya*) is that of ordinary people.

While in Madhyamaka the Ultimate was described negatively as Emptiness, the Yogācāra system defined the Absolute as mind (*citta*), and regarded psycho-physical methods as most effective in bringing about the goal of Liberation. In Buddhist Tantrism, the notion of the Absolute as something substantial was maintained and further elaborated. Emptiness acquired an ontological status represented symbolically by the "unbreakable" *vajra*, the thunderbolt. In Tibetan Buddhism, the *vajra* became an important ritual

object, and Emptiness also became personified either as Buddha or as the goddess Prajñāpāramitā.

The Ultimate experienced by the adept was now seen as embodying two characteristics, Great Bliss and Compassion. Great Bliss was on the one hand seen as a unity or as perfect purity, the *dharmakāya* or the Mother.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand the Absolute was conceived of as a union of the relative and the absolute, symbolized in a number of dual concepts, e.g. a passive female and an active male principle, profound cognition (*prajñā*) and skilful means (*upāya*), sun and moon, left and right, lotus and *vajra*, blood (*rakta*) and seed (*śukra*), night and day, etc. This duality, also basic in Madhyamaka philosophy, was systematized in the *tantras*, although the symbolic systematization and ritualization varied in the different texts. The complementary oppositions are synthesized in a third concept that transcends duality, and this concept is seen as representing the Absolute.

In Tantric Buddhism, the path to Enlightenment is understood as a fusion of duality through the ascent of the *bodhicitta*, not gradually through ten stages as in Mahāyāna thinking, but through the four *cakras* or psychic centres of the body. By means of complex yoga techniques it was promised that Liberation could be achieved in a single lifetime.

In the psychic veins there is also a free flow of vital-breath (*prāṇa*) which is closely connected with the psychic energy or *citta*. The breath is seen as the vehicle of the *citta*. As long as the two remain unchecked, man will be bound to *saṃsāric* existence. Through yogic control of breathing, the two can be led through the central channel, the *avadhūtī*, and Great Bliss will be attained. A side-product of elaborate yogic practices was the development of extraordinary mystic powers.

The Buddhist *tantras* are thus a group of texts that have in common the message that Enlightenment is possible in this life independently of a person's *karma*, that the body of the aspirant is not a hindrance, but rather a dynamic tool towards this end, and that there is an absolute existence, beyond duality.

### 2.5.2. *Female Symbolism*

P. Kværne writes:

One of the innovations of tantric Buddhism which studies of this religious system seldom fail to emphasise, is the important role played by the female aspect of existence. (1977:34)

Female and male imagery are used to describe the two aspects of existence; but by themselves, female symbols can be seen as representing the ultimate reality. Sometimes a female symbol represents the Absolute, at other times goddesses come to symbolize the reintegrated whole.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, male deities are used to express the highest reality, i.e. as Vairocana, Akṣobhya, or Hevajra. However, D. Snellgrove claims that female symbolism predominates. He states:

In this union Wisdom, although unrealizable apart from Means, yet predominates. It has behind it the whole tradition of the Perfection of Wisdom, already actually symbolized in a feminine divinity, the Goddess Prajñāpāramitā. She is therefore herself the supreme truth of the Void (śūnyatā) which is the Perfection of Wisdom; in the *Hevajra-tantra* she is Nairātmyā, 'absence of the notion of selfhood,' and it is in her that the yogin, as Means, is consubstantiated. (1959:24)<sup>42</sup>

#### The Goddess Tārā

Prajñāpāramitā is an important goddess in Tantric texts, but to most Tibetans she is a distant goddess, of whom they know little. Tārā, the saviouress, on the other hand, is one of the most widely venerated deities in Tibetan religion. The cult of Tārā originated in India, but the Tibetans incorporated her in their myth describing how the Tibetan race arose.<sup>43</sup> Above all, she did not become the exclusive property of any of the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Tārā is the saviouress, who protects her people; they can turn to her with all their sorrows and joys, and she readily helps those in need. Tārā is venerated by men and women alike, but it appears to me that women have a special relation to her.<sup>44</sup>



### 2.5.3. *Sexual Symbolism*

Per Kværne states:

the union of male and female was regarded – at least when it took place in a ritual context – as nothing less than a restoration of the primeval Buddha-nature; and conversely, the internal process of yoga resulting in the abolition of duality was thought of in terms of sexual union. (1977:34)

In Tantrism, the merging of the female and male aspects of existence are conceptualized as a sexual intercourse between man and woman. All along, the rite is carefully controlled through yogic techniques; the breath, carrying the vital life-force, is conceived of as having the nature of blood and seed, and the seed is supposed to ascend upwards, from the the genitals, the base of the *bodhicitta* in relative condition, to the *cakra* in the head, where the *bodhicitta* in its absolute condition resides. Tantrism is pervaded by sexual symbolism and the most conspicuous image in Tantric iconography is that of the female and male deity consummating the sexual union.

### 2.5.4. *Women Participating in Sexual Rites*

In Tantrism, the female principle is no longer conceived of as something to be transcended, and the physical body becomes the vehicle through which Enlightenment is reached. A basic idea is that the passions have to be lived out in order to be overcome. Emotions and passions are used as vehicles in the process of Liberation.

There is no reason to doubt that the descriptions in the *tantras* of sexual rites, the consumption of flesh and wine, singing and dancing, and other behaviour so contrary to the *Vinaya* rules, were in fact carried out. Breaking social conventions was advocated as a mean to abolish attachment to social status and conventions. Thus Tantric practitioners often lived among outcasts. Women chosen as consorts in Tantric rites could be prostitutes, dancing-girls, or come from other despised social groups.<sup>45</sup> The commentaries to the *tantra*, however, deal with these rites as an internal process within the body of the *yogin*,<sup>46</sup> and frequently *yogins* and *yoginis* strictly adhered to their monastic vows, while only symbolically practicing the highly esoteric sexual rites.<sup>47</sup>

The religious practices advocated by the *tantras* were in theory equally accessible to men and women, although in reality male practitioners far outnumber the female.<sup>48</sup> Both men and women were seen as having the same possibilities of reaching Enlightenment through ritual sexual intercourse. We often come across stories about *yogins* who seem to be stagnating in their spiritual progress, but through the help of a female consort, they reach new insights. As most of the stories about personal Tantric experiences are told from the male point of view, we get the impression that they are the main actors, and that their female companions are passive counterparts, participating solely to help bring about spiritual insights on part of the *yogins*. However, there are some biographies of highly accomplished female Tantric practitioners who in their own right choose their male assistants, and whose spiritual progress we can follow in detail.<sup>49</sup> Although women were often conceptualized as passive counterparts to an active male part in Tantric rites, they nevertheless occupied a central position in the rite.

### The Symbolic Aspect of the Appearance of Nuns and *Yoginīs*

Buddhist monasticism can be viewed as an effort to establish a sacred realm dissociated from the profane world. The vows taken by the novice involve a passage from the worldly to the spiritual realm. The cutting of the hair, the monastic robe, and a new name indicate that the neophyte has entered a new stage. The robe and the shaven head symbolize the asexual nature of the monastics.<sup>50</sup> As passion and lust were seen as representing the profane world, the attractiveness of the body had to be concealed. Monastics were not allowed to wear ornaments nor use perfume. Nuns had to wear a bodice for the purpose of hiding the breasts.<sup>51</sup>

Many of the *yoginīs* wear the dress of laywomen, but in the monastic colour. This probably indicates that the monastic vows were not strictly followed. While performing specific yoga exercises, the Tantric adepts often wore white cotton clothes. In Gechag Thekchen Changchub Ling and Galo Nunneries, nuns generated mystic "internal heat" (*tummo*) wearing white cotton garments.

Many Tantric practitioners wear their hair long. The symbolism of the long hair is very complex, and it indicates, among other things, magical power.<sup>52</sup> We know that the *yoginīs* Yage Kunsang

Drolma, Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche, Dorje Phagmo, and Drigung Khandro wore their hair long. Bhikshuni Tendzin Palmo mentioned that Lama Karma Thinley had told about some *yoginī* nuns (possibly from Gechag Thekchen Ling Nunnery), who while meditating, hung their hair over a string suspended behind their backs. Usually, *yogins* wear their long hair tied up on their head.<sup>53</sup>

We may say that as opposed to monastic Buddhism, in Tantrism the symbolic dissociation from the physical body and sexuality, expressed in clothing, is no longer stressed. Female Tantric adepts have more or less the same appearance as the *yogins*, indicating equality of status. However, in terms of address, there is a special Tibetan term for the *yogin*, *togden*, while a feminine form of this term is not used for addressing *yoginīs*. They are called by the honorific *jetsunma*, a more general term of respect. A Tibetan nun mentioned that nuns from aristocratic families in Tibet were automatically called *jetsunma*, without reference to their religious practices, and they were often installed in the most important positions in the nunneries, like that of the chanting-master.

When female Tantric adepts succeeded in their spiritual pursuits, they became the equals in prestige and reverence to their male counterparts. These outstanding women are all described as being independent, intelligent and strong individuals, who on their own have gone through severe ordeals, never giving up their faith or succumbing to physical and mental hardships.<sup>54</sup> Above all, the stories of their lives show their determination, in that they disregard social conventions, the opinions of husbands and family, and they often wandered alone in the vast desolate areas of Tibet. We will deal with the lives of *yoginīs* in the chapters that follow. Here it is sufficient to say that Tantric ideology, with the important role assigned to the female aspect of existence, accorded *yoginīs* the same opportunities as men on the spiritual path.

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## Nunneries and Nuns in Tibet

### 3.1. The Number of Nunneries and Nuns Before 1959

No accurate census of the population of traditional Tibet has been carried out, and when scholars try to estimate the number of monasteries in Tibet, they deal with approximate numbers. There is great variation between the different estimates. A survey of Tibetan monasteries and nunneries is being made by the Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs of H.H. the Dalai Lama, based on government records and on what exile Tibetans remember concerning the number and geographical distribution of monastic institutions. The estimate is based on the latest findings up to May 1984.<sup>1</sup>

According to this record, there was a total of 818 nunneries and 27,180 nuns in Tibet before the Chinese occupation in 1959. In Central Tibet, in the areas of U-Tsang, Hortso and Barkham, there were 160 nunneries belonging to the Gelugpa School, with a total of 6831 nuns. There were 290 nunneries of the Nyingmapa School, comprising 7141 nuns, 227 Kagyupa nunneries with altogether 3697 nuns, and 40 Sakyapa nunneries with 1159 nuns. In eastern Tibet (Kham), there were 52 Gelugpa nunneries with 4468 nuns, 29 Nyingmapa nunneries with 2467 nuns, 10 Kagyupa nunneries with a total of 1017 nuns, and one Sakyapa nunnery with 80 nuns. In northeastern Tibet (Amdo), the record is 8 Gelugpa nunneries with 290 nuns, and one Nyingmapa nunnery with 30 nuns. According to the survey there were altogether 11,589 Gelugpa nuns, 4714 Kagyupa nuns, 9638 Nyingmapa nuns, and 1239 Sakyapa nuns.<sup>2</sup> According to a record of Nyingmapa monasteries published by Lama Paltul Jampal Lodoe, there were 198 Nyingma nunneries in U-Tsang, with a number of 5042 nuns. In Kham there were 9 nunneries with 543 nuns. Thus the total number of Nyingma nunneries and nuns estimated in this survey are: 207 nunneries and 5585 nuns. There is no record of Nyingmapa nun-

neries in Amdo.<sup>3</sup> As concerns Nyingmapa nuns, the estimate given by the Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs is thus a little higher than that given by the Lama Lodoe.

There were also nunneries belonging to other traditions than the four major Buddhist schools. Shelkar Sholpa Lama, a Tantric practitioner (*ngagpa*) from western Tibet, informed me about one nunnery, belonging to the Bodong School, Gamcog Nunnery situated in the northern part of Shelkar. The Bodong School was founded by Bodong Chogle Namgyal (1376–1457). The monks and nuns at Samding Monastery likewise followed Bodong practices.<sup>4</sup> There were also Bonpo nuns. Sangye Tendzin, the abbot of the only Bonpo Monastery established in India, mentioned that in the Bonpo monastery of Khyunglung Ngulkhar near Mt. Kailash there were both resident monks and nuns. In the summer of 1988, Per Kværne visited Dragkar Yungdrung Khyiltse, a Bonpo nunnery in Amdo with some twenty-five nuns.

In many areas there were no nunneries, and one option for nuns living there was to attach themselves to a monastery. One informant, a Nyingmapa lama, Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche, maintained:

In the lower part of Derge there were mostly monasteries and only a few small nunneries. However, there were many nuns who did not stay in nunneries. In the case of Amdzom Gar Monastery for instance, there were 300–500 affiliated nuns. Many of the nuns did retreats and when there were big gatherings or rituals in the monasteries they would come there. Most of these nuns belonged to the Kagyupa School. Mostly in Central Tibet one would find separate nunneries.

Ngawang Dondup Narkyid, a layman originally from Lhasa, claimed:

In the Tsang area there were many big nunneries. There were more nunneries in this part of Tibet than in others. These were mostly Nyingmapa and Kagyupa nunneries. I believe that the Kagyupa School had the largest number of nuns in Tibet, while there were few nuns belonging to the Sakya School. Probably the number of nuns is affected by the local influence of lamas.

A monk who lives in Kham, but visited Dharamsala in 1984, stated:

In the area of Nagsho Driru (upper Kham) I do not know of other



*Nuns in Dragkar Yungdrung Khyiltse, a Bonpo nunnery in Amdo.  
(Photo: Per Kværne).*

nunneries than the Nyingmapa Gonlung Champa Ling. However, there were many individual nuns, most of them Gelugpa. They stayed in their homes or in retreat. Many of these nuns were serious and wanted to study, and some of them practiced high-level meditation. Some of the independent nuns were better religious practitioners than those staying in nunneries. These independent nuns didn't have to work, they were supported by their relatives or by others.

Among the larger nunneries in Tibet were Gechag Thekchen Changchub Ling, a Kagyupa nunnery in Nangchen Kham, Gonlung Champa Ling, Galo Nunnery (Kagyupa) situated near the village Yangpachen (west of Lhasa), close to Shamar Rinpoche's monastery Yangchen Gonpa, and the Nyingmapa nunnery Shugsep Gon. Lama Karma Thinley writes that Gechag Thekchen Changchub Ling housed from 700 to 1000 nuns,<sup>5</sup> while an exile nun, Khacho from Geja, who stayed in the nunnery, maintains that there were about 300 nuns staying here.<sup>6</sup> The Tibetan monk presently living in Kham, maintained that there used to be 350 nuns in Gonlung Champa Ling. A Swedish nun, Britt Lindhe, who visited the ruins of Galo Nunnery in 1985,<sup>7</sup> stated that this nunnery used to house 500 nuns, while an old Tibetan nun, Bhikshuni<sup>8</sup> Kunsang Wangmo maintained that Galo Nunnery was the most famous nunnery in Tibet and that it had more than 100 nuns. In the survey published by Lama Lodoe, the number of nuns at Shugsep Gon is estimated to be 410, while R.D. Taring writes that there were about eighty nuns in this nunnery.<sup>9</sup> Informants are thus at some variance concerning the size of the largest nunneries in Tibet.

Among middle-sized nunneries were Nechungri and Tsamgung<sup>10</sup> nunneries in Lhasa. According to informants there were between eighty and one hundred nuns in each of these nunneries. The relatively large nunneries seem to have been exceptions, as informants maintained that Tibetan nunneries usually had ten to fifty nuns.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2. The Establishment and Character of Nunneries

#### The Founding of Nunneries

Nunneries were often affiliated to monasteries, and the initiative to start a nunnery could come from the founder of the mother monastery, as in the case of the Nyingmapa nunnery Gonlung

Champa Ling, affiliated to Charu Monastery. The monk from Kham who visited Dharamsala in 1984, maintained that both were founded by Charu Nyima Dragpa (1647–1710). The nun Khacho stated that Gechag Thekchen Ling was founded by Gechag Tsangyang Gyatso. Gechag Tsangyang Gyatso had built Raya Monastery as his main seat, and he was asked by his guru, Tsoknyi Rinpoche, to establish a nunnery.<sup>12</sup> About the monastic establishments of Gechag Tsangyang Gyatso, Karma Thinley writes:

I have heard that there were about thirteen sub-monasteries (to the main one) and these included monasteries, nunneries and hermitages. Also, there are many other non-sectarian nunneries there (in Nangchen Kham). (1965:69)<sup>13</sup>

Some nunneries were started as a result of the initiative and joint efforts of nuns.<sup>14</sup> Disciples of a great lama often settled near his monastery or hermitage. If there was a sufficient number of nuns they sometimes started their own monastic establishment. The nun Yeshe Drolma and her friend Kunsang built the hermitage Dragkhu close to the Drugpa Kagyu monastery Thosam Changchub Ling in order to be close to their guru Potrul Rinpoche.<sup>15</sup>

The focal point of all religious communities were the lamas. We have, however, information about one nunnery that was established by a famous female teacher, Shugsep Lochen Rinpoche and her disciples. Yutog Dorje Yudon, an aristocratic lady from Lhasa, told the following about Lochen Rinpoche's nunnery:

Jestun Lochen became famous in Lhasa and Central Tibet. She went to Shugsep and stayed there. My mother used to go and see Lochen Rinpoche and she brought me with her. I was then a small child. A hermitage had already been established at Shugsep, but after Jetsun Lochen settled there, the hermitage grew and became a kind of nunnery. It was situated halfway up a mountain-side, and further up was Longchen's (1308–1363) monastery. It was not exactly a nunnery. The nuns had a three-storied house and on the second floor there was an assembly-hall where they performed offering-rituals. The nuns stayed in twenty or more retreat huts that were spread out on the hill-side, not too close to each other. The site was beautiful with many juniper trees<sup>16</sup> and small springs.

It was a rare event in the history of Tibet that a religious community centered around a female teacher, and Jetsun Lochen was



among the most widely known and respected female adepts in Tibet.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the large Tibetan monasteries had branch monasteries or nunneries.<sup>18</sup> The retired chanting-master in Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala, Ngawang Choezin, stated that the Gelugpa Nechungri Nunnery in Lhasa was associated to Sera Monastery. The nunnery did not have an abbot, but one of the abbots from Sera came now and then to give them advice concerning rituals and meditation. Otherwise the old chanting-master acted as an abbot.<sup>19</sup>

Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo and the late nun Changchub Chodon maintained that the Kagyupa nunnery, Chedo in Nyemo, where they had stayed, belonged to H.H. Karmapa.<sup>20</sup> Monk teachers were supplied from Karmapa's monastery, Tshurphu.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.2.1. Types of Nunneries

Per Kværne classifies Tibetan monasteries into three main types: the “national monasteries,” the “village monasteries,” and the “hermitages.” “National monasteries” were large institutions, offering advanced religious studies and recruiting monks from all over Tibet. The function and organization of these monasteries resembled medieval European universities. The “village monasteries” were smaller, and recruited their members from the surrounding district. The monastic education offered was aimed at meeting the needs of the local population. There was extended contact between the “village monastery” and the local inhabitants. The “hermitages” were inhabited by a limited number of monastics or *yogins*, who devoted their life to meditation.<sup>22</sup> We have no information of any nunnery in Tibet that resembled a “monastic university,” and the majority of the nunneries belonged to the “village” and “hermitage” types. While the largest “monastic universities” could have several thousand monks – thus Ganden, Sera, and Drepung were inhabited by a total of some 20.000 monks,<sup>23</sup> – we have no information about nunneries with more than a few hundred nuns.

There were some monastic institutions where both monks and nuns lived. The arrangement seems to have been that monks and nuns performed communal rituals together and received religious teachings from the same lama, while their housing remained

separate.<sup>24</sup> One informant, Bhikshuni Tendzin Palmo, a British woman who has been a nun in the Tibetan tradition for twenty-five years, related that in Lahoul there is a monastery, Tayu Gonpa, housing both monks and nuns. The monks and nuns participate in the same rituals and are given the same religious instructions. Nonetheless, the monks have a higher status than the nuns, and the nuns have the responsibility of serving tea and food for the monks.

A former government official from Lhasa, Thubten Sangye, told about a specific kind of monastery housing married monks and nuns:

Belonging to the Kagyupa School, there were some types of nunneries with a very loose organization. These nuns had long hair and they were married. Their husbands were called *onpo*. After the Kagyupa School lost political power, there were still many monasteries left and these were taken care of by these married nuns and *onpos*. They lived in the monasteries which were called *serkhyim gonpas*. Some of these *serkhyim gonpas* are also found in Tsang. The *serkhyimpas* performed minor prayers, and when they came to Lhasa they would go from door to door and offer religious services, for which they would get a small payment. Sometimes they would perform the ritual dances known as *cham*. Most of the *serkhyimpas* were old people, and generally they were regarded as being of inferior status. However, high lamas did not treat them badly, they considered them better than ordinary people, because they performed prayers and took care of monasteries that would otherwise fall apart.<sup>25</sup>

In Tibet there were a number of government monasteries that received funds from the Lhasa Government. The monasteries had landowner rights, which included the right of taxation. The tax consisted of agricultural produce, labour-service, and a monk levy. The Gelugpa Monastery Shelkar Chode described by B. Aziz belonged to this category.<sup>26</sup> We do not have any information about government nunneries, although one informant, Shelkar Sholpa Lama, probably referred to a nun levy when stating:

In some villages it was compulsory to send girls to a nunnery. If for instance there were three daughters in a family, one was sent to the nunnery.

C.W. Casinelli and R. Ekvall state that some nunneries controlled by Sakya<sup>27</sup> had a system of nun levy.<sup>28</sup> We do not know whether

the arrangement of a nun levy was widespread. None of my older nun informants had become nuns because of such taxation.

### 3.3. Tibetan Nuns

#### Tibetan Terms for Nun

Three different Tibetan terms are generally used to denote a nun: *ani*,<sup>29</sup> *jomo*,<sup>30</sup> and *gema*. Tashi Tsering maintained that the term *ani* is used in central Tibet, *jomo* in western Tibet, Ladakh and Amdo, and *gema* is a term used in the northeastern part of Kham. I have also come across the term *tsunma* used for nuns,<sup>31</sup> while *jet-sunma* is the honorific term used to address advanced *yoginīs*. While *ani* is the most common term for addressing nuns in the Central Tibetan dialect, there is, according to Tashi Tsering and Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo, a polite form *chöla*. Lekshe Tsomo maintains that *chöla*, and also *tsunma*, are more currently used today.<sup>32</sup>

There is disagreement among scholars as to whether the English term nun is appropriate in a Buddhist context. B. Aziz is reluctant to use the English term because of its celibate connotations.<sup>33</sup> One informant maintained that strictly speaking, the Tibetan *ani* denotes a woman who has taken the novice ordination. Nevertheless, in common usage the term *ani* is also used to include unordained women dressing and living like the ordained ones. An informant stated:

We call them all *anis* because it is impossible for us to know whether they have been ordained or not.

Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo has informed me that since *ani* means aunt,<sup>34</sup> several Tibetan nuns in exile get offended when this term of address is used. Since the term *ani* by some is considered impolite, I will generally use the English term nun.

#### Ordination

Buddhists are divided into two main groups, that of laymen and laywomen and those who belong to the Buddhist Order, e.g. monks and nuns. The main vows that laymen undertake are to abstain from killing, stealing, lying, adultery, and drinking alcohol.<sup>35</sup> For those who join the Buddhist Order, there are two different ordinations, that of the novice and that of the fully ordained monk

or nun. Tibetan Buddhists follow the ordination practice of the Mūlasarvāstivādin School. In their version of the *Vinaya*, *bhikṣuṇīs* have to obey 356 rules.<sup>36</sup> According to the majority of the Tibetan scholars whom I interviewed, there is no evidence in the textual material or from oral sources that the full ordination for women ever existed in Tibet.<sup>37</sup> Tibetan nuns are thus denied the full ordination, and can only “go forth” as novices.

### The Religious Careers of Nuns

In terms of variation, Tibetan nuns pursued three main careers. A large number of nuns stayed in nunneries. Some of these nuns were advanced religious practitioners; among them were the *yoginīs* at Gechag Thekchen Ling, Jetsun Khacho Palmo from Ne-chungri Nunnery, the nuns Yage Kunsang Drolma and Palchung from Dzalung Nunnery,<sup>38</sup> and Shugsep Jetsun Lochen. However, the level of religious practice and education in Tibetan nunneries varied, and informants maintained that the majority of nuns staying in nunneries mainly performed rituals and were not engaged in advanced religious practices.

A second class of nuns concentrated all their efforts on meditation and yoga. These nuns wandered about on pilgrimage searching for gurus who could give them further teachings, or they stayed in solitary hermitages, pursuing meditation. This was the path followed by the nuns Jetsunla, Yeshe Drolma, Ugdrön, Taphag Ani, and many others.<sup>39</sup> The number of nuns following this solitary career was nevertheless relatively small.

The third category consisted of a large number of nuns, who neither stayed in nunneries nor engaged in yoga and meditation. Most were uneducated, and many of them had only taken formal ordination when they became old. Some might have stayed in nunneries for a part of their life, but found it difficult to adjust to monastic life. Others were itinerants, constantly on the move. Their main religious practice consisted in saying prayers, reciting *mantras*, turning prayer-wheels, performing circumambulations, and going on pilgrimage.<sup>40</sup>

## Recruitment of Nuns

It was considered meritorious for a family to provide a member to the Order, and the general opinion among Tibetan informants as well as western scholars is that each family provided at least one son or one daughter to the monasteries. However, this seems to have been an ideal more than an established fact. As no statistical material concerning the recruitment to nunneries is available, the assumption is difficult to assess.

Children of about six to eight years of age hardly decided themselves to become nuns or monks, but it seems that they soon adjusted to monastic life, and for most of them, the ordination was a lifelong commitment. All of my nun informants who were ordained in Tibet, told me that it was their independent wish to become nuns. The nun Yeshe Drolma was not attracted to lay life, and went on a long pilgrimage to western Tibet to avoid being married off by her family.<sup>41</sup> Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo became a nun when she was twelve years old, against the will of her parents. It was her own wish to lead a life according to the Dharma that made her take this decision. She was inspired by an older sister who had been a nun, but who had died. Jetsunla ran away from her parents in order to become a nun.<sup>42</sup>

Suffering as lay women was part of the reason why some women came to the nunneries. Drongpon Gyalpo, the former chieftain of Drongpa in Kham, told the story of the nun Palchung (who died in the 1960's) who was ill-treated by her in-laws and ran away to Dzalung Nunnery in Nangchen. In the late nineteenth century there was another famous nun from this nunnery, Yage Kunsang Drolma, who likewise had run away from the man she was going to marry.<sup>43</sup> The Sherpa nun, Chodon, had been beaten by her sister-in-law, and after her first child had died she left her husband and started leading the life of a wandering religious practitioner.<sup>44</sup>

There were thus a variety of reasons why Tibetan women became nuns, ranging from the wish of their parents, independent religious motives, suffering in lay life, to a compulsory nun levy. Some came to the nunneries because a close relative was living there.<sup>45</sup> Informants maintained that whoever wears the robe of the Buddha is worthy of respect, and this may have been one reason why some women undertook ordination.

### 3.4. Organization of Nunneries

The duties found in nunneries were those of chanting-master (*umtse*), disciplinarian (*chötrimpa* or *gekö*), caretaker of the shrine-room (*chöpön*), her assistant (*chöyok*), and the kitchen-duty (*nyerpa*).<sup>46</sup> The task of playing instruments during recitation in the temple rotated among nuns qualified for this task. Some nunneries had a more restricted variety of duties than the ones mentioned. There could be one or several nuns serving in each post, and there was a system of rotation where most nuns came to serve in several of the different duties. The nun Khacho related the following about the duties in Gechag Thekchen Ling Nunnery:

The staff members of the nunnery were: six chanting-masters, six disciplinarians, two temple officials and twelve temple servants. There were four nuns playing each of the different musical instruments.

When nunneries were affiliated to monasteries, the leader of the monastery, the abbot (*khenpo*), could also be the abbot of the nunnery, or a monk from the monastery could be appointed to teach or to function as the abbot of the nunnery.<sup>47</sup> We have mentioned that this was the case in Nechungri Nunnery and in Chedo Nunnery. About the religious instructions given at Chedo Nunnery, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo related:

We were thirty-three nuns at Chedo, and it was the second-most famous nunnery in Tibet. There was no lama living permanently in our nunnery, but we used to invite H.H. Karmapa and other lamas. Later, we invited Lama Gyaltshab who was the special private serving lama of the Fifteenth Karmapa. He stayed in the nunnery for one year, and afterwards we went to him for important religious teachings.

One informant, Tsering Drolkar, a middle-aged laywoman, related the following concerning the leadership of the Gelugpa Lhoka Nunnery situated in Chongye:

Sometimes the former abbot of Dragpo Dratshang visited the nunnery. Two times a year he gave religious teachings to the nuns. Otherwise the chanting-master was the leader. She was usually the most learned and was chosen because of her personality.

The office of abbot was generally restricted to men; however, there were a few cases of female abbots in Tibet. One was the Ab-

bess of Samding, Dorje Phagmo.<sup>48</sup> L.A. Waddell mentions that in northern Tibet, on the shore of lake Namtso Chugmo, there was another sanctuary to Dorje Phagmo, with a nunnery headed by an abbess. Harrison Forman writes that the abbot of Dragkar Monastery was the female *tulku* Alakh Gongri Khandro.<sup>49</sup>

The ordinary nunneries, with twenty to thirty nuns, were generally insignificant institutions compared to monasteries. Although affiliated to monasteries, and often under the supervision of male abbots, Tibetan nunneries seem to have had a large degree of self-rule. Often the nunnery was established some distance away from the mother monastery, as this was considered the best solution to apostacy. Even though the nuns had a monk abbot, he did not always live in the nunnery, but visited it now and again. Monk informants maintained that they were reluctant to visit nunneries because of fear of losing their celibacy vow, and thus nuns were more or less left to manage on their own, the chanting-master or the disciplinarian acting as the daily leader. Although many nunneries were affiliated to a monastery, there were a few where the religious activities centered around a great female adept, as in the case of Shugsep Lochen, and there was at least one monastic institution officially headed by a nun, viz. Samding.

### Discipline

In some nunneries, the disciplinarian was the most powerful person. Her role was to see to it that the nuns behaved properly while performing prayers in the shrine-hall, that the nuns used their time for studies at hours scheduled for this purpose, and that they kept their vows properly. Often the disciplinarian assigned the different manual tasks to be performed in the nunnery. A middle-aged laywoman from Lhasa, Lobsang Dekyi Lhawang, who had herself been a nun, told the following:

In the Gelugpa Nunnery of Tsamgung in Lhasa, the *gekö* had considerable authority. There were 115 nuns in the nunnery,<sup>50</sup> most of them from well-to-do families. Every time a nun broke a rule she would get a flogging or she would have to pay a fine.

The vows of celibacy were generally taken seriously in Tibetan nunneries and monasteries, particularly those belonging to the

Gelugpa School.<sup>51</sup> A Tantric practitioner from western Tibet, Shelkar Sholpa Lama, stated:

Near Mt. Everest, in the village of Dzarong Phu in western Tibet, there was a Nyingmapa monastery called Thonga Chöling. Lama Dza-trul Ngawang Tendzin Norbu who is my teacher, stayed at that monastery. Nearby, there were several nunneries. The monks from Thonga Chöling were not allowed to visit the nunneries without special permission, even if they had a sister in one of them. The same rules applied to nuns who wanted to visit the monastery. These nuns were very good at meditation. It was their own choice to stay in the nunneries.

Geshe Ngawang Dargye from Kham stated:

In the Gelugpa Nunnery Dragkar Choga Teng in Kham, the discipline was very strict. No male could visit the nunnery, and when the nuns went out they always had to be three together. Whenever the nuns met a monk, they had to bow down and remove their shawl.<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, in Gechag Thekchen Ling, strict discipline was enforced. The nun Khacho claims that the founder of the nunnery, Gechag Tsangyang, made the nuns follow the same rules as those followed at Nangchen Tsechu Monastery. She related:

The nuns had to perform their duties without any mistakes. If they made mistakes, they were punished accordingly, for instance, they had to do one hundred prostrations.

The late nun Changchub Chodon told the following about the nunnery where she stayed in Tibet:

In Chedo Nunnery, a nun could get permission to visit her family for only one day until she had finished her preliminary practices.<sup>53</sup> This was a very arduous practice, in which some nuns spent years. After we had completed the preliminary practices, we were allowed to visit our families for one month.

Not all nunneries were known for their strict discipline, however; a middle-aged layman related:

Northeast of Lhasa there was a Gelugpa Nunnery called Nago Dong with about twenty nuns. The nunnery was founded by Khardo Rindzin Chokyi Dorje (d. 1820). The nuns here used to drink *chang* (Tibetan beer).



One informant, an old nun, told me that there were rumors saying that some nuns in Tsamgung Nunnery in Lhasa had love affairs with high government officials and rich business men. The nuns staying in this nunnery came from wealthy families, and they wore very expensive robes. Some nuns were said to have become pregnant.<sup>54</sup>

In Tibetan religious literature and from oral sources there are many stories of monk *tertons* (discoverers of hidden texts),<sup>55</sup> who with the help of consorts were able to fulfill the reconstruction or discovery of a text. Drongpon Gyalpo told about a famous *terton*, Rindzin Nuden Dorje (1849–1903) and his consort, the nun Yage Kunsang Drolma. The informant stated that Rindzin Nuden Dorje and the nun followed the *Vinaya* rules very strictly. When the *terton* needed the assistance of his consort, the sexual union between the two was consummated only symbolically.<sup>56</sup>

It is a common conception among western scholars that Tibetans are quite tolerant towards monks and nuns who break their vows.<sup>57</sup> Based on my own fieldwork, I got the impression that there is a stigma attached to breaking the vow of celibacy,<sup>58</sup> however, the question is complicated as Tibetan Buddhism combines monasticism and Tantric practices. The different schools of Tibetan Buddhism are at some variance as to how the *Vinaya* rules are to be practiced.<sup>59</sup> In the Nyingmapa School, and apparently also in the Kagyupa and the Sakyapa Schools, a lama, a monk, or a nun can be married or practice Tantric rites while still wearing the monastic robe. Only in the Gelugpa School was celibacy strictly enforced.<sup>60</sup> It seems, however, that most nunneries strictly enforced the rule of celibacy, while it was acceptable for *yoginis* living outside the nunneries to participate as consorts in Tantric rites. When a woman, whether nun or laywoman, was chosen as the consort of a respected lama, she, too, became highly respected in society.

### 3.5. Religious Training and Practice

It was not customary for ordinary Tibetan women to be educated. This privilege was restricted to a few aristocratic ladies and to women wanting to pursue a religious career. To accomplish the training in monasteries and nunneries, however, the skills of read-

ing were needed, and most monks and nuns attained this basic level of education.

Some of the large monasteries had the character of universities, teaching the inmates subjects like philosophy, medicine, grammar, art, astronomy, and astrology. The Gelugpa School stressed the aspect of philosophy and logic more than other traditions. In the three great Gelugpa monasteries, Sera, Drepung, and Ganden, monks could attain the *geshe* degree. This degree was given to fully ordained monks who had mastered metaphysics and important branches of sacred literature. In the Gelugpa School, this study normally took at least twenty years.;<sup>61</sup> The *geshe* degree could also be obtained in other schools.<sup>62</sup> Also in the Bonpo religion, the study of logics and philosophy has been considered very important.<sup>63</sup> Although the *geshe* degree could be obtained in the so-called “unreformed” schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Nyingmapa and the Kagyupa Schools put more emphasis on meditation and yoga practices than on scholastic studies.<sup>64</sup>

### Scholastic Training

There is little evidence that nunneries ever resembled or functioned as Buddhist universities. Nunneries did not have economic resources, the organizational structure, or able teachers to impart higher education. However, the basic dichotomy between philosophic studies in the Gelugpa School and greater emphasis on yoga and meditation training in the older traditions, seems to hold true also for the nunneries. We only know of Gelugpa nuns being trained in logics and philosophy in Tibet. Geshe Ngawang Dargye told the following about the training in a Gelugpa nunnery in Kham:

The nunnery Dragkar Choga Teng was founded by Dragkar Tulku Lobsang Palden Tendzin Nyandrag.<sup>65</sup> This was a scholastic nunnery, and the nuns studied debate and logic. They were excellent nuns, who did very good religious practice, and they kept strict discipline. The main studies in the nunnery were based on the text *Lamrim Chenmo* by Tsongkhapa.<sup>66</sup> The monks were required to study this text with commentaries, while the nuns studied the text only in an abridged form. While the Gelugpa monks made extensive studies of philosophy and *tantra*, the nuns were taught the same subjects in a simple form by their lama. Two of the nuns from Dragkar Choga Teng, Gakyi and Budrug, who both came from the noble family of Sadu Tshang, were

said to have been very accomplished debaters. In addition to studying logic and philosophy, the nuns in Dragkar Choga Teng also arranged for the whole Kanjur (108 volumes) to be copied in golden ink.<sup>67</sup>

Ngawang Dondup Narkyid stated:

Nuns in the nunneries mainly memorized prayers. Individually they could learn meditation, but not philosophy. This was because in the traditional way of teaching, women just did not study these subjects. However, a relative of mine had a nun teacher, and this nun went to Sera Monastery in order to learn higher religious practices.

Drongpon Gyalpo maintained:

It is claimed that nuns practiced debating in some Gelugpa nunneries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, nuns were generally not taught metaphysics in Tibet.

### Yoga and Meditation Training

The few nuns that studied logic and philosophy mainly belonged to the Gelugpa School, while the more practical yoga and meditation training was in the forefront in Kagyupa and Nyingmapa nunneries. That the religious practice in nunneries of these schools was more practically oriented is attested to by informants. About the religious practice in the Kagyupa nunnery Gechag Thekchen Ling, the nun Khacho tells:

As daily practice the nuns did many retreats which were very strict, one following the other. Starting in the fourth Tibetan month, many of them did a thousand sets of fasting. The most diligent nuns did one thousand prostrations a day. Those who were accomplished in yoga, practiced the art of extracting essences from elements (*chulen*).<sup>68</sup> This was done in order to improve the health and achieve a long life. They also did many other religious practices. Those who were very highly advanced spiritually, had the power to pass through walls and locked doors.<sup>69</sup>

On the fifteenth of the twelfth Tibetan month, at about six o'clock in the evening, over two hundred nuns would gather and do yoga practices the following night. In the morning at the first ray of light, they all went around the nunnery dressed in short skirts and thin white linens. At the four corners of the nunnery, they dipped the white cloth in ice-cold water and put the cloth on again. The lamas and the rest of the disciples watched the nuns from the roof-top (of the nunnery) and

played ritual music. People from all over the area used to come and watch them. While watching the nuns do the “inner-heat” practice during the coldest time of the year, when there was snow and ice, they gained much faith and devotion in the Dharma.<sup>70</sup>

About the religious practice at Gechag Thekchen Ling, Karma Thinley writes:

There were about twenty different meditation caves where they (the nuns) used to meditate, get initiations, and practice religion. In many caves they did different meditations on twenty Tantric deities. On the fifteenth day of the first month of the Tibetan year, early in the morning, about one hundred nuns would compete in the skill of yogic control of the breath.<sup>71</sup>

In another very famous nunnery in Tibet, Galo, the nuns likewise did the “inner-heat” practice. The old chanting-master from Tillokpur Nunnery, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo, related:

In the early winter morning the nuns would do an outdoor circumambulation. Along their route, four posts were set up. The nuns soaked their clothes at the first point, and then proceeded to the next. The clothes were supposed to be dry before they reached this second post. They would then soak the clothes again and go on to the next spot. In this fashion the practice continued. Even Gyalwa Karmapa’s own monastery, Tshurphu, could not compare to this nunnery. The nuns here were exceptionally good religious practitioners. They were better than the monks in performing rituals and in doing meditation. Once, when Gyalwa Karmapa visited this nunnery, they made a splendid procession for him. They possessed all the necessary ritual instruments, even the long trumpets not usually found in nunneries.

Britt Lindhe stated that the Galo nuns were famous for their skill in meditation and yoga:

In the Lhalung area not far from the nunnery, there were retreat huts for the Galo nuns. There used to be sixty nuns in retreat here. Close to a place called Lugtse, there was another hermitage for fifteen nuns. One nun meditated here until she died in 1980. Both these retreats have been destroyed.

A Tibetan monk related the following about the religious practice in the Nyingmapa nunnery Gonlung Champa Ling in Nagsho Driru:

Gonlung Champa Ling was an excellent nunnery. All the nuns staying

here were educated. Some of them practiced meditation according to the Nyingmapa tradition. Some of these Nyingmapa nuns were in retreat all their lives, meditating on their protective deity. They stayed in small huts, and received teachings individually. The nuns also practiced “essence-extraction” (*chulen*), which consists of subsisting on herbs and small stones. An additional religious practice in the nunnery was committing oneself to the vow of not speaking of any secular topic for a specific length of time. Some nuns kept this vow for the rest of their lives. The vow of only talking about religious subjects is said to be fairly often undertaken by nuns.<sup>72</sup> Some of the nuns were known for their *yogic* exercise of breath control.

Shelkar Sholpa Lama told about advanced meditation practices in other nunneries:

Near Mt. Everest, in the village of Dzarongphu, there was a Nyingmapa monastery called Tonga Chöling founded by Lama Dzatrul Ngawang Tendzin Norbu. There were several nunneries nearby, Rongphu Tö, Rongchung, Changchub Tharling, and Tashi Thongmon. Altogether, there were about one thousand nuns. Some of these nuns were highly skilled in meditation and stayed in retreat their whole lives. Some practiced sealed-door retreat.<sup>73</sup>

### Religious Training in Ordinary Nunneries

Most nuns neither pursued advanced philosophical studies nor the elaborate yoga practices mentioned above, but mainly spent their time performing rituals and reciting prayers. The late nun Changchub Chodon told that in Chedo Nunnery, the nuns performed the rituals in the same way as they were done in Karnapa’s monastery Tshurphu:

Every day we chanted prayers to the protective deity of the nunnery. On the first, fourth, and sixth day of every month we did confession (*sochung*). Special prayers to the Medicine Buddha, to the different Karma Kagyu Lamas, to the *dākinī* Dorje Phagmo, and to Amitābha were performed on the eighth, fifteenth, twenty-fifth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth day of the Tibetan month respectively.

About the religious practice in the same nunnery, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo related:

We mostly meditated on our own at Chedo Nunnery. We performed communal prayers on specific dates, but the only ritual we did together

daily, was a prayer to Mahākāla. We fasted in the first, fourth, and sixth months. This practice consists of not eating, drinking or speaking for a specific period of time.

When asked to characterize the religious activities in nunneries, Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche stated:

There was no tradition in Tibet of nuns studying dialectics. Usually nuns did more meditation and rituals, like fasting. They did more practical things all the time. The religious practices mostly performed by nuns were memorizing prayers, accumulating merit, service and worship, and retreat practices. In monasteries, such religious practice constituted only a small part of the training, while in nunneries the main emphasis was put here.

In addition to ritual recitation, most nuns performed the preliminary practice, which consists of 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 recitations of the Vajrasattva *mantra* accompanied with visualization, 100,000 *maṇḍala* offerings, and 100,000 invocations of the lineage lama. This is very arduous and time-consuming but must be undertaken in order to start more advanced meditations. Also, nuns meditated on their protective deities.

If nuns excelled, this was most often in meditation and yoga, seldom in philosophy and scholastic studies. In Tibetan Buddhism, performing rituals is seen as a necessary complement to other religious practices, but rituals by themselves are not considered to be advanced practice.<sup>74</sup> If an abbot or male teacher was present in the nunnery, he could pass on religious teachings to the nuns, but nunneries often did not have such religious leadership. In the case of the Gelugpa nunnery Dragkar Choga Teng, the Kagyupa nunnery Gechag Thekchen Ling, and the Nyingmapa Gonlung Champa Ling, the founder of the nunneries were highly qualified lamas who took care in teaching the nuns. These are, however, exceptional cases that in no way represent the general education and religious practice in nunneries.

### 3.6. Economic Support

#### Economic Support of Individual Nuns

In Tibetan monasteries and nunneries there were two parallel economies, that of the individual monks and nuns and that of the monastic institution. A family who sent a son or a daughter to a

monastery was expected to continue to support them. Marlam Nyenlag maintained:

Nuns came from both rich and poor families. Usually their families built houses for them and they received a fair share of the food. Even poor families built houses for their nun daughters. In the case of farmers, they divided the farm and one share was for the nun. Generally, villagers would support the nunnery with firewood. If their parents were poor, the nuns could also form a group of four or five, and go begging during the autumn.

Shelkar Sholpa Lama stated that Yulokgö Nunnery mainly housed nuns from rich families and these families supported the nunnery lavishly. One informant, an old nun, stated that the nuns from Tsamgung Nunnery in Lhasa had very good living quarters and good clothes. Thubten Sangye maintained that the Tsamgung Nunnery mainly recruited nuns from wealthy Lhasa families. He claimed that the younger nuns had to work hard in the nunnery, but they could offer money or food in order to be exempted from monastic duties. A monk from eastern Tibet mentioned that nuns staying in Gonlung Champa Ling came from rich and middle-income families. This seems to have been necessary, since the nunnery was situated in a desolate spot, and the nuns therefore seldom received donations from lay people:

The Nyingmapa nunnery Gonlung Champa Ling was situated in the upper end of a long narrow valley, and a village in the lower end. It took four days to reach the nunnery from the village. The nunnery was thus very isolated, there were only a few nomads staying close by. The mountain behind the nunnery, Gonlung Gyabri, was an important pilgrimage-site, and the nuns were sometimes visited by pilgrims.

The nunnery consisted of two houses, the main one had two stories and the other one. There were several meditation huts close by. There were 350 nuns, of whom about 200 came from rich nomad families and the rest from middle-income families. These nuns were well supported, and some of them were given a female yak by their relatives. On a mountain side the nuns had organized a dairy, where the poorer nuns served the well-to-do ones by herding and milking their animals. In return the servants would get a share of the produce.

There was thus a system whereby a poor nun could be the personal servant of a rich nun, and in turn be given food or other commodities. We do not know whether this was generally practiced in Tibetan nunneries. In case of the Sherpas, employing per-

sonal servants seems to have been restricted to the wealthiest among the monks.<sup>75</sup>

As long as we have only scant information about the recruitment to nunneries in Tibet, we cannot arrive at any definite conclusions about the social background of nuns. Most of my informants maintained that nuns came from all walks of life, but mainly middle-income families. As families had to continue to support an “unproductive” child in a monastery, it is likely that this could not be afforded by the very poor.<sup>76</sup>

As mentioned above, many nuns lived independently of nunneries. To earn a living many of these nuns were supported by their families or they were employed in lay households. Lobsang Dekyi Lhawang stated:

My father was a governor of Derge, and we had stayed in eastern Tibet for several years. On our way back to Lhasa, we met many lamas and they said it would be beneficial if I became a nun. If I became a nun, it would be good for myself, but it would also be of help to my mother, because there were many children to take care of. My mother was very religious and wanted me to become a nun. This was also my wish. I was ordained when I was thirteen years old, and I stayed at home with my family. I did early morning prayers, and afterwards I helped look after the children. There were two other nuns related to my family and we considered it our responsibility to support them.

R.D. Taring writes about nun nannies in *Daughter of Tibet*.<sup>77</sup> In exile there are several nuns supporting themselves by working for lay people. A nun who formerly stayed in the Tilokpur Nunnery is presently (1984) employed in a hotel in Dharamsala.

It was considered meritorious for a lay person to support religious specialists. The nun Yeshe Palmo maintained that the nun Jetsunla was well provided for by villagers while staying nearly thirty years in strict retreat. Since they took so good care of all her needs, she never had to leave her cave.<sup>78</sup> However, Jetsunla was an extraordinary religious practitioner and it seems to have been more difficult for ordinary nuns to obtain economic support.

### Economic Support of the Nunneries

The large monasteries in Tibet were independent administrative units, with great economic and political power. Their economic basis was landed property, livestock, trading, and gifts from lay



people, and in the case of some Gelugpa monasteries, subsidies from the government. The Tibetan Government did, however, commission prayers to be performed in nunneries. Thubten Sangye stated:

The Tibetan Government requested nuns to perform special prayers, e.g. prayers to Tārā, for the general well-being of the Tibetans and our religion. The nunneries were paid for such ritual services.

Compared to monasteries, nunneries were poor, insignificant institutions. Even though many of the nunneries were affiliated with monasteries, it appears that they received little of their economic support from this source.<sup>79</sup> Most nunneries seem to have been economically autonomous institutions. Part of their income was based on gifts from local people, or from pilgrims. If a nunnery was situated close to a village, the inhabitants may have supplied the nunnery with firewood and other necessities. In some cases, the local landlord would contribute to the support of the nunnery. Tsering Drolkar stated:

In Chongye there was a Gelugpa nunnery called Pawo with twenty-five to thirty nuns. The Changlung aristocratic family supported the nuns and they also received donations from the farmers in the area. The nuns' families also supported them, but if a nun came from a poor family, she could be supported by the nunnery. These nuns didn't have to care for their welfare. They didn't have to work, except for performing rituals. Close to the nunnery there was a holy site consecrated by an Indian *pandit*, and the pilgrims came to visit this sanctuary. Many pilgrims gave donations to the nuns.

Yutog Dorje Yudron told the following about Tsering Jong Nunnery:

At Yarlung there was a nunnery called Tsering Jong. It was a Nyingmapa nunnery. My grandmother used to stay here and I used to come and visit her. The nunnery was founded by a close disciple of Longchen Rinpoche (1308–1363). He was a very learned and famous lama. There were sixty-five to seventy nuns in this nunnery. The nuns here were supported by aristocrats and by other lay people. Below the nunnery there was an aristocratic landlord named Posho, and this family gave support to the nuns. Each nun had an income from her family. Often a nun would get a share of the family land. Generally the nuns were very generously supported. There were no beggars among them. Sometimes a group of them would go to the farmers and ask for food. We don't call this begging.

Agricultural labour was sometimes mentioned by informants as a source of income for nunneries. Lama Jetsun Khacho Palmo staying at Nechungri Nunnery had been offered fields on which the nuns grew their own crops.<sup>80</sup> Another source of income was handicrafts.<sup>81</sup> It would also seem that ordinary nuns were more easily than monks taken out of the nunneries by their families to participate in agricultural work.<sup>82</sup> Lobsang Dekyi Lhawang maintained that when monks were small, they were usually only taken home from the monasteries for holidays. Nuns, on the other hand, were taken out of the nunneries to help at home when the crops were ripe.

### 3.7. Interaction with Lay People

Tibetan village monasteries and nunneries were generally established close to inhabited areas, and there was extended contact between monastery and lay community.<sup>83</sup> Nuns would visit friends and relatives in the villages and lay people could freely come to the nunnery.

Nuns performed religious services for lay people. They were either requested to recite prayers in the nunnery or sometimes they were invited to lay people's homes to officiate at rituals.<sup>84</sup> Nuns were called on to perform prayers during life-crises, such as illness, births or deaths, or in order to obtain certain material benefits. Generally, monks were more often asked to perform such rituals, but if monks were not available, or if the nuns had a good reputation, they were asked to perform such religious services. When the nuns performed rituals collectively at the request of lay people, the payment in money or kind would go to the nunnery as a whole. If a nun performed ceremonies privately, the income was her own.

There were thus two parallel economies in a nunnery, that of the nunnery as an institution and that of the individual nuns. As was the case in monasteries, private property was allowed, a fact that served to maintain status differences among the inmates. Several of the monasteries were quite rich, being landowners or engaged in trade, while the nunneries generally had more modest sources of income. The nuns were supported individually by their families in the same way as the monks, but it was easier for a

monk to earn a living by performing religious services for lay people than it was for a nun.

### 3.8. Nuns and Nunneries in Tibet Today

In 1982 a young Gelugpa lama went back to Lhasa to visit his family. He reported that in Lhasa he observed several nuns wearing lay clothes and a scarf on their head. The shawl was used to conceal their shaven head. Individually they received religious teachings from lamas. A monk who lives in Kham, but visited Dharamsala in 1984, told the following:

Many nuns still keep their vows strictly, even though the Chinese forced them to marry. Now they practice religion silently in their homes. They wear lay clothes and keep their hair long. In Lhasa I saw many young nuns. Most of them are workers and they have to wear Chinese dress. Underneath they are wearing brown and maroon clothes. Under scarfs they conceal their shaven heads. They are riding bicycles. My older monk friend and I were very surprised when these nuns came to us and asked for vows and religious teachings. There appears to be more young nuns than young monks, and the nuns inspire the young boys to become monks.

**Britt Lindhe** who visited Galo Nunnery in the summer of 1985, relates:

Galo Nunnery belongs to the Karma Kagyu School. Before 1959 people say that there were about five hundred nuns belonging to the nunnery. The nunnery was destroyed by the Chinese, and today only the ruins are left. The nuns were made to build stone fences down in the valley, and they lived in a kind of labour camp. The nuns owned seventeen heads of cattle prior to 1959, which they were forced to sell to the Chinese for a very small amount of money. They were not allowed to visit the site of the nunnery nor to study religious scriptures. Most of their religious texts were burned.

Today there are about fifty nuns belonging to Galo Nunnery. Many of them stay with their families, and come to the nunnery to perform communal rituals. The nuns have started rebuilding the nunnery. The local people are supporting them as they want the nunnery back. At present there are not enough rooms for all the nuns, and seven of them are sleeping in the open. They have an outdoor kitchen. The nuns are supported by their relatives, but they are very poor.

The leader in the nunnery is an elder nun, the chanting-master. She is a *yoginī*. Previously, she used to wander about, but because she now has very bad legs, she is staying in the nunnery. Only a few nuns own religious texts. During rituals, these nuns recite the prayers, while the

other nuns chant *mantras*. There is no-one to give them religious instructions, as it is very hard to find lamas who can teach them. The nuns have invited some lamas, but they have not even answered their invitations. The nuns are doing morning prayers and they pray to Tārā. The Mahākāla prayer they do is not complete, as they lack part of the text. The nuns needed help with making offering cakes and in reciting the *Chö* texts properly.

The nun Sonam Chotso, the sister of Lama Ngawang, with whom I travelled to Tibet, is a nun in Galo Nunnery. She is now forty-seven years old (1985), and she became a nun just a couple of years prior to the occupation. She did not learn how to read and write until the beginning of the seventies. The Chinese did not allow the nuns to study or to practice religion at all. While I stayed at Galo, I saw a young Tibetan girl, about twelve years old, being brought to the nunnery by her family. They were all very proud. The young nun was riding a white horse, while her relatives were following her, riding yaks.

In the Lhalung area not far from the nunnery, there were retreat huts for the Galo nuns. There used to be sixty nuns in retreat here. Close to a place called Lugtse there was another retreat-site (*drub-khang*) for fifteen nuns. One nun meditated here until she died in 1980. Both these retreats have been destroyed. About one and a half days' walk from Galo, there is another Karma Kagyu nunnery with thirty nuns, called Dorje Ling. There is contact between the two nunneries, and they seem to be exchanging nuns.

Today (1985), monks and nuns are allowed to do religious practice, but they do not show their activities openly to the Chinese. In Lhasa one can often see nuns, and among them are several young girls. They were prostrating for Lama Ngawang and me asking for religious instructions. During harvest time, there were no nuns in the nunneries. They were all out working in the fields.

Several informants told about the destruction carried out by the Chinese. Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo related:

Karma Hoser went back to visit Tibet in 1983. There was not a sign left of Cedo Nunnery. Of the twenty-nine nuns that were left in Tibet, only three are nuns today. They stay in their homes. Two of them were the students of Changchub Chodon and myself.

Most of the nunneries mentioned in this chapter have been destroyed by the Chinese. In spite of the attempts made by the Chinese to eradicate the religious and cultural heritage in Tibet, they have not succeeded. Although nuns were forced to marry or to disrobe, there are still nuns in Tibet today who keep their vows strictly and who silently practice religion. In the past years the Chinese have admitted that the destructions in Tibet during the

Cultural Revolution was a mistake. In the 1980's, they have been more lenient to accept religious practice, and some monasteries and nunneries are being rebuilt.

Since western tourists have been allowed to visit Tibet, there have been numerous reports of demonstrations and of violations of human rights. Generally, western newspapers report that there have been four demonstrations: the twenty-seventh of September 1987, the first of October 1988, the fifth of March 1988, and the tenth of December 1988. According to *Tibetan Review*<sup>85</sup> there have been about fourteen other demonstrations in the same period.

The first of October 1987, thirty-seven years after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, Lhasa experienced one of the most violent riots since 1959. Hundreds of Tibetans, led by monks and nuns, demanded Tibet's independence in the Barkhor demonstration. Over a dozen people were killed in the violent clashes between Tibetans and Chinese soldiers. According to *Tibetan Review*, there were about 20,000 Tibetans demonstrating in Lhasa on the fifth of March 1988. On the tenth of December 1988, on the fortieth anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, thirty monks and nuns marched into the Barkhor square, demonstrating peacefully, carrying the Tibetan flag. Western eyewitnesses tell that a group of soldiers armed with machine-guns fired at the demonstrators from a distance of two meters. Eighteen Tibetans were killed, at least fifty people were wounded, and many were imprisoned.<sup>86</sup>

Western Human Rights groups have numerous reports of nuns being tortured in Chinese jails. Reliable sources tell that the twenty year old nun Tsering Drolma from Chusang Nunnery, was arrested on the eighth of March 1988 for taking part in the Barkhor demonstration. She was detained for seventy-nine days without trial at Gurtsa prison. In prison she was stripped naked and severely beaten with electric batons and bamboo sticks, the electric batons being applied to vulnerable parts of the body, like the mouth and the eyes. Another nun, twenty-five years old, was imprisoned together with four young nuns from Ghari Nunnery, aged between fourteen and nineteen. This nun tells that the police set a dog on her, and she fell unconscious from beatings with an electric baton on her back, hands, and the soles of her feet. The Ghari nuns were burned with a cigarette. The Chinese interro-

gated them about who sent them to demonstrate and why they claimed Tibet is independent.

Several informants who have visited Tibet in recent years have the impression that especially young nuns are very eager in their religious pursuits and many of them bravely show their opposition to the Chinese occupants. In fact, Tibetan nuns seem to have been very active in several demonstrations, and on four occasions, the fourteenth of December 1987, the seventeenth of April 1988, the twenty-fourth of April, and the seventeenth of May 1988 there have been demonstrations arranged by nuns in Lhasa.<sup>87</sup>

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## Accomplished Nuns

### 4.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of nuns who have left a mark in Tibetan history, either as accomplished *yoginīs*, as learned in the religious scriptures, or in other ways. Stories of famous nuns and other accomplished female religious practitioners serve as ideals with which Tibetan nuns today can identify. Further, such accounts give an impression of how these women were viewed in society and which careers were open to them.

We will mainly deal with nun *yoginīs* in this chapter. Several of the Tibetan *yoginīs* were laywomen, like the wives of Naropa and Marpa, Niguma and Damema,<sup>1</sup> while others had taken monastic ordination. When dealing with the scant historical material concerning Tibetan female adepts, it is sometimes difficult to know whether the woman in question is a nun or not. By looking at the woman's title, the way she is dressed, and from the general context, I have tried to make out whether the woman has been ordained. It must be stressed, however, that the differences between lay *yoginīs* and nun *yoginīs* are often slight. Several of the nun *yoginīs* strictly kept their vow of celibacy and some of them stayed in nunneries, while it seems that most *yoginīs* practiced meditation in solitary hermitages. Common to them is their stress on meditation and yoga techniques, which aim at controlling physical and mental processes, with the ultimate purpose of bringing about final Liberation.

### The Sources

This chapter is based on biographical sketches, other historical documents, articles, memoirs, and letters written by Tibetans, and finally interviews with Tibetans in exile. Biographies are an important source of information, being the "liberation story" of a

holy person. Such biographies were often written by the disciples of the master in question, who wished to elevate their teacher to superhuman status and attribute to their guru all sorts of miraculous powers. We are thus presented with portrayals intended to give the reader a religious ideal to follow. There are several biographies of female religious practitioners, and in the sacred biographies of famous *yogins* and *yoginīs* in the early religious history of Tibet, there is no limit to their fantastic powers and displays of magic. Among female adepts, who are more godlike than human, are Yeshe Tsogyal and the female lineage-holder of the *Chö* practice, Machig Labdron. These great *dākinīs* or *yoginīs* are known to all Tibetans, and their lives have for centuries been relegated to superhuman spheres. In the biographical accounts of these women, mythical and historical events are blended and it is difficult from such accounts to make out the actual histories of their lives.

In the following I will mainly present information about nun adepts that my informants could remember from Tibet, nuns whom they had themselves met or heard people talk about. When focusing upon religious practitioners who lived in the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries, the biographical data become more realistic and closer to “real” life. Some of these female religious specialists were barely known outside their circle of disciples. These women often practiced meditation and yoga in deserted areas, and because neither formal positions nor official recognition were offered them, the histories of their lives remain largely unknown.

Compared to what has been written about celebrated monks and *yogins*, there exist very few records of the lives of nuns and other female religious practitioners. This is partly due to the fact that few women were educated and could write about their religious experiences. Of the few accounts that did exist, little has survived the Chinese attempts at destroying Tibetan culture, especially during the years of the Cultural Revolution. Only a few of the writings by or about accomplished female religious practitioners were brought out from Tibet in 1959.



## 4.2. Spiritual Accomplishments

### 4.2.1. Attainment of Miraculous Powers

In early Buddhism and in the classical yoga system, displaying and clinging to occult powers was considered an obstacle to reaching the final goal of Liberation. In Tantrism, however, a more positive attitude towards the attainment of miraculous powers is evident.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Tibetans strongly emphasize the miraculous powers attained by their outstanding religious practitioners, and see them as a sign of their spiritual insight. When interviewing Tibetans about famous nun adepts, what they most readily remember about them is their attainment of miraculous powers.<sup>3</sup>

### The Power of Making Miraculous Pills

Informants mentioned several cases of nuns who could empower pills so that they had healing effects. K. Dhondup and Tashi Tsering write that S.C. Das was sick when he visited Samding Monastery in 1882, and on the advice of Jetsun Ngawang Rinchen Kunsang, one of the Dorje Phagmo incarnations, took her magical pills (*rinchen rilbu*).<sup>4</sup> The retired chanting-master in the Dharamsala Nunnery, Ngawang Choezin related:

A nun called Khyung Rinpoche from Tsang used to take barley grains and empower them through rituals. This grain was said to be very powerful. I was also told the story about a nun who used to meditate in a cave above Chusang Hermitage, situated northwest of Sera Monastery. This nun never washed her clothes, and after she died people took patches of her robe as talismans. In Lhasa her followers made a powder of these patches which they mixed with sand and medicine and made into pills. The power of these pills was said to cure the most common diseases.

Related to the belief that great religious masters can transmit their spiritual powers to pills and medicine, is the belief that this power is transmitted to clothes and objects worn by them. Drongpon Gyampo related that people used to keep the nun Yage Kunsang's hair as a talisman.<sup>5</sup> R. D. Taring relates that during the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese in Lhasa in March 1959:

To protect me from stray bullets I took an old dress of Lochen Rinpoche's that I had exchanged for a new dress some years before. (1983:

227) I gave each of the soldiers a piece of Ani Lochen's dress to protect them from bullets. (Ibid.:242)

There is also the phenomenon of magic knots on strings (*sungdü*) empowered by accomplished religious practitioners. Most Tibetans wear one or several such strings around their neck. The nun Yeshe Palmo told that the protection-cords blessed by the nun called Jetsunla were very effective:

She gave protection-cords to help people, animals, and fields alike, and her blessings were always very beneficial and effective. Many humans and animals were relieved of their illnesses due to prayers by Jetsunla.<sup>6</sup>

### The Miraculous Power of Seeing Things in an Occult Manner

Drongpon Gyalpo stated that the nun Yage Kunsang Drolma obtained the occult power of knowing the past, the present, and the future. Thus she was able to foresee that her symbolic consort, Rindzin Nuden Dorje, was going to rediscover some texts by himself, without her help.<sup>7</sup> Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche remembered another nun who had attained this "superknowledge":

Also in Derge, in a place called Horpo Samkha there was a nun called Ugdrön. She stayed there in a hut together with two dogs. She was still alive when I was young – she died sometime between 1943 and 1944. Nobody knew how old she became. Older people thought she was between 120 and 150 when she died. Her great quality was that she knew past, present, and future. There is no record of her giving instructions or keeping disciples, but many people came to see her. Ugdrön would immediately tell them the histories of their lives. Many people thought that she was either a demones or a goddess.

### The Miraculous Power of Extracting Essences for Prolonging Health and Long Life

S.C. Das writes that there are different kinds of essences for giving long life and good health; the elixir of meditation, that drawn from flowers, and that drawn from pebbles.<sup>8</sup> The nun Khacho related that several of the Gechag nuns mastered this art.<sup>9</sup> A monk from Kham stated that nuns staying at the Nyingmapa nunnery

Gonlung Champa Ling could draw essences from pebbles as well as from herbs:

The nuns here did *chulen*, which includes not eating ordinary food, but herbs or small stones. This religious practice they did year by year, and in the end they did not need food.

One of the famous twenty-four nun disciples (*majo*)<sup>10</sup> of Padampa Sangye, Majo Chökyab, is reported to have survived only on water.<sup>11</sup> Related to the magical power of extracting essences for prolonging life, is the power to live as long as one wishes. About a consort, who later became a nun, Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche related:

Bumo Khandro Thinley Peldron (b. 1865), the consort of Terton Sogyel of Nyarong (1856–1926) was likewise well known. She did not become a nun until she was older. She lived until she was more than 115 years old. Her body, except her eyes, looked like that of a fifteen year old. The eyes turned blue and her hair became silky white as signs of old age. She died sometime before 1959. She had the power to live as long as she wanted. The Tibetans compare her with Yeshe Tsogyal and consider her a true *dākinī*.

### The Miraculous Power of Passing Through Walls

The nun Khacho related that some of the most highly advanced religious practitioners at Gechag Thekchen Ling Nunnery had the power to pass through walls. Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche recalled that the nun Semo Jamyang Chodon attained this power:

The sister of my previous incarnation, Garje Khamtrul Gyurme Thinley Namgyal (1880–1927), the nun Semo Jamyang Chodon, was very famous. She was the daughter of a chieftain called Garje of Derge. She was not famous for learning, but because of her power of meditation. In her latter days she could walk through walls.

Although not famous for having passed through walls and locked doors, there were other nuns who attained extraordinary physical powers. The nun Nene Choden Sangmo was known by two of my informants, the nun Yeshe Drolma (b. 1908) and Drongpon Gyalpo, the former chieftain of Drongpa. They related that Nene Choden was born near Drigung at a place called Drupang. Her

chief guru had been Drigung Dripon Ngawang Rinpoche. Yeshe Drolma met Nene Choden in Drigung; she recalls:

I received initiations from a nun called Nene Choden Sangmo, a very accomplished religious practitioner, who left her footprint on solid rock.<sup>12</sup>

The nun Khacho told the following about Tsogyal Drolma, one of the most accomplished nuns from Gechag Thekchen Ling:

Especially Tsogyal Drolma was very accomplished. She was known as the emanation of Yeshe Tsogyal. Once when she performed a *Phurpa* ritual, the main *phurpa* (dagger) in the *maṇḍala* began to move about. She tied it up with an iron chain, and this *phurpa* can still be seen there today. Besides this, she had the power to bring gods, demons, and humans under her will. There were several other nuns who were as accomplished as Tsogyal Drolma: Tsomo, Mugtsug, Rindron, Dronden, Yingchuk, Lhachog, Palmo, Lhadze, Wangchuk Chodon, Dungri, Ari, and Tendru Sangmo.

### The Miraculous Power of Knowing the System of the Body

One of the classical yoga practices is controlling the breaths that are believed to circulate in the veins, resulting in the production of internal heat. A common portrayal of the Tibetan *yogin* is the adept who almost naked meditates in the snow and ice of the Himalayas. The most well-known of these *yogins* is Milarepa (1040–1123), Mila the “cotton-clad.” In the previous chapter several examples were mentioned of nuns who were skilled in this religious practice. The nuns from Galo Nunnery and Gechag Teckchen Ling were well-known for mastering this technique.<sup>13</sup> Geshe Ngawang Dargye told about a particular nun who was skilled in the inner-heat practice:

The nun Tashi Pema from the aristocratic family Hor Athubtsang in Kham was a very accomplished *yoginī*. She attained great realization in psychic heat. When other nuns would freeze in the snow, she would not.

#### 4.2.2. *Attainment of the Rainbow-body*

In Tibetan Buddhism, the religious accomplishment of a person is often made evident by what happens at her or his death. Biographical literature gives information about several nuns whose bodies dissolved at the moment of death. Jomo Memo was an accomplished *yoginī* and a discoverer of sacred texts. She attained the “rainbow-body” (*jalü*).<sup>14</sup> Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche knew of a nun who attained the occult power of associating with *dākinīs*:

In my generation there was also Taphag Ani. She was originally from Nangchen and came from a well-to-do family. Later she went to southern Tibet, to a place called Pema Ko. Here she meditated in a deserted area. On the tenth of every Tibetan month people used to come to this place to perform prayers to Guru Rinpoche.<sup>15</sup> On this day people would find Taphag Ani totally drunk, but there was no *chang* (Tibetan barley beer) to be found anywhere. Ani Taphag told them that she had participated in a big ritual offering together with the *dākinīs* and that she had drunk the *chang* used for offerings. Taphag Ani died in the refugee settlement Changlang in Assam.

My informants could relate several stories about nuns whose bodies disappeared at their death. The nun Ngawang Choezin who stayed in Nechungri Nunnery in Lhasa until 1959 related:

There used to be a very accomplished religious practitioner in our nunnery called Jetsun Khacho Palmo. Her body dissolved when she died. Her biography has been written, but I never took the time to read it.

In the booklet written by the abbot and the nuns at Geden Choe-ling, it is stated that before her incarnation as a woman, Jetsun Khacho Palmo had been born many times as a man and had always lived as a monk. After meditating for thirty years she attained the rainbow-body.<sup>16</sup> Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche told about several nuns attaining the rainbow-body:

Pema Lingpa, or as he was also called, Nyangla Drime, who founded Sengri Garpa Monastery in Derge Ragchab, had two highly accomplished nun daughters. The older one called Asog was very learned and greatly respected. In 1959 when the Chinese were persecuting the Tibetans, they were unable to do any harm to her, because she died of her own will. Her younger sister Semo Nordzin was also very accomplished. She manifested the rainbow-body. This happened when she stayed at the pilgrimage site Sengdong Drub.<sup>17</sup> An old nun named Lumo, was her servant and it was she who told the following story to

me: "Every morning the nun Semo Nordzin did one session of meditation. When she had finished she used to ring her bell so that I would know that it was over. This particular day I didn't hear the bell, but I was afraid to disturb her. I waited until lunchtime before I went inside. Here I found Nordzin in meditation position, but her head and hands were missing. Only her robe of sheep-skin and her sash were left. Nordzin was practicing religion in the Nyingmapa tradition, while her sister Asog did both Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyu practice.

When asked about famous female adepts in Tibet, several informants mentioned Sera Khandro (b. 1892). She was the consort of Pema Drodul Sangnag Lingpa (1881–1924).<sup>18</sup> Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche maintained that she attained the rainbow-body. The nun Yeshe Palmo related the following about a Kagyupa practitioner, the nun Jetsunla,<sup>19</sup> who stayed in a Tibetan refugee camp in Orissa. A relative of Jetsunla had married Yeshe Palmo's aunt, and through her aunt, Yeshe Palmo met Jetsunla twice. She tells:

Jetsunla was born around 1905 in Amdo. She was the only child of a very wealthy family, and her parents loved her highly. As a child she always took joy in seeing, hearing, and doing religious things. When travelling *yogins*, both male and female, came begging at their house, she was inspired by their example. Already at a very young age she formed the intention of becoming a nun. She told her parents about her wish and asked them for permission, but they refused.

When Jetsunla was seventeen years old, her parents made preparations for her marriage. Being very wealthy they had made many expensive ornaments for her. She begged and pleaded with them to allow her to become a nun, but they refused. Determined to follow her wish, she took all the jewels and ornaments and with one maid servant she ran away. At that time she was eighteen years old.

From then until the age of twenty-five, she travelled as a pilgrim all over Tibet. At each of the different holy places she made offerings of some of the ornaments she had brought, but kept the most precious ones for future use. During these seven years of pilgrimage, Jetsunla travelled mostly by night and remained hidden by day, because she was harassed by rude men. Even though she now and then had trouble with men and wild animals, she never, even for an instant, gave up her purpose.

At the age of twenty-five, Jetsunla met the lama whom she recognized as her teacher. She had saved a precious jewel for her guru and he gave her religious teachings. For twenty-nine years, she stayed in strict retreat. Villagers made offerings to her so she never had to leave her cave. Even at this time she was known as an extraordinary adept.

When the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1959 she had to break her retreat. She had to leave Tibet, and was helped to India by her cousin,

who later married my aunt. In India they were sent to a refugee camp in Orissa. After some time, her cousin built her a hut from mud and grass on a small hill-top surrounded by forest. The hut was just big enough for Jetsunla to receive two visitors. The Tibetans staying in the seven different refugee camps in Orissa all recognized her as an extraordinary religious practitioner. She was revered as the highest lama of that area. People would ask for her blessings and for her advice both in spiritual and worldly matters.

To be able to do her own religious practice she would receive devotees only from the first to the ninth day of each month. For the rest of the month she meditated. Jetsunla was like a wish-fulfilling gem. She had achieved so much and attained such a high state of realization that she could choose to pass away or to remain living. A few months before she passed away she said: "Now I have accomplished what I had to do and have achieved everything that I need to. Now I don't have to live any longer. I am very happy if I can go soon, but before I go I must see His Holiness the Dalai Lama, because I have a few words to say to him." About a month later His Holiness visited Orissa and conferred privately with her for over an hour. She came out from this wonderful meeting very happy saying: "Now my last wish is fulfilled, now I am free to go." Soon after she became slightly ill and remaining in meditation posture she passed away.

Related to the phenomena of the rainbow-body and the illusion-body, is the shrinking of the adept's body at the time of death. Drongpon Gyalpo told that when the nun Nene Choden Sangmo died her body became very small, the size of an arm's length, from the elbow down. This nun was a great *yoginī* and she kept her hair long as *yogins* do. Trekhang Tsering Drolma, a middle-aged laywoman from Chongye, related:

From my parents I heard the story about a highly accomplished nun, but I do not remember her name. She used to meditate in a cave above the Chusang Hermitage. Later the place became a pilgrimage-site. Once, I was in retreat close to the place where the nun meditated. This *yoginī* passed away when she was young, but when she was still alive her body became smaller and smaller. She was very small when she died. Nobody knows how old she became.<sup>20</sup>

Sherpa Rinpoche had likewise heard about the famous nun from Chusang:

Northwest of Sera there was a nunnery called Chusang. It was an independent Gelugpa nunnery with about twenty-five nuns. They mainly performed rituals focusing on Vajrayoginī and Tārā. These nuns did not have specially high status. Lay people made offerings to them, and

the nuns had a dairy and were well-known for their good milk. Several of the nuns lived separately, and some of these nuns were very good meditators. Among them there was a highly qualified nun who obtained the Jetsunma title. Some of the nuns staying outside the nunneries seem to be very serious, they concentrate on their religious practice.

Tibetans can relate numerous stories about miracles that occur at cremation sites. When highly accomplished adepts die, people report having seen rainbows in the sky, rains of flowers, sounds and lights, and often hard glittering particles, *ringsel*, are found in the ashes. Drongpon Gyalpo told about another famous nun staying at Dzalung Nunnery (the same nunnery where Yage Kunsang Drolma stayed):

There was another famous nun at Dzalung Nunnery. Her name was Palchung. She was the sister of Togden Gechung, the master of a hermitage close by. When Palchung was young, she married and had two sons, but her inlaws beat her and she became a nun in Dzalung Nunnery. Until the Chinese came to this area, she was in "sealed door retreat." She was highly revered and respected. She was older than her brother, and they both died in the 1960's, then in their seventies. There were many miraculous signs at their deaths.

At the deaths of the twenty-four nun disciples of Padampa Sangye, miraculous sounds and lights were seen.<sup>21</sup> Lama Garje Khamtrul told that when the nun Ugdrön from Derge died, many miraculous things happened. There was thunder and earthquake and a rain of flowers. The nun Yeshe Palmo related that when Jetsunla died, the air was filled with sweet scent, and the sounds of cymbals could be heard. At the time of her cremation, the sky was filled with rainbows. There are numerous other signs marking outstanding religious adepts. Religious practitioners who have recited one hundred million seed-syllables of deities are said to get a new tooth (*dungso*). This happened with the nun Yeshe Drolma's father,<sup>22</sup> and Geshe Ngawang Dargye told that at Turung Ridro, a nun called Abima is supposed to have recited the *mantra* to Avalokiteśvara thousand million times, and a new tooth appeared in her mouth.



### 4.3. Nun Consorts

Among famous consorts in Tibet are Yeshe Tsogyal, one of the consorts of Padmasambhava, Machig Labdron, the consort of Padampa Sangye, possibly the twenty-four nun disciples of Padampa Sangye, and Jomo Memo, the consort of Guru Chokyi Wangchuk. Jomo Memo was herself a discoverer of texts.<sup>23</sup> Other accomplished Tibetan consorts were Sera Khandro, Bumo Khandro Thinley Peldron,<sup>24</sup> and Khandro Ogyen Tsomo.<sup>25</sup>

#### Symbolic Consorts

J. Willis writes as though all the highly accomplished Tibetan *yoginīs* were consorts.<sup>26</sup> There were, however, several nun *yoginīs* who probably kept their celibacy vows strictly, among them the nuns at Gechag Thekchen Ling, at Galo Nunnery, and at Gonlung Champa Ling. An alternative for monks and nuns not wanting to break their celibacy vows, was a symbolic enactment of the Tantric sexual union. Drongpon Gyalpo told that a symbolic performance of the sexual rite was not uncommon in Tibet.<sup>27</sup> He told this story as an example of such religious practice:

One of the nuns staying in Dzalung Nunnery in the Drongpa Med area of Nangchen was a highly accomplished *yoginī*. Her name was Yage Kunsang Drolma. She symbolically participated in a ritual sexual union with the founder of the nunnery, Rindzin Nuden Dorje. Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) had once prophesied that Rindzin Nuden Dorje would be a rediscoverer of sacred texts. Guru Rinpoche had told his protective deity Anye Dringyal to look after certain texts and when the right person came along he should deliver the scriptures to him. When the right time had come, Rindzin Nuden Dorje had a dream in which the deity appeared, and told him that he was going to rediscover some texts. The deity further said that he had called Rindzin's consort. She would be coming to this area of Drongpa in order to get married. The revelation ended by the deity saying that his duty was over and that Rindzin would meet his consort the following day.

The woman came from Yagra in Kham to the Drongpa area to get married, but she ran away from her prospective in-laws and came to Dzalung Gonpa. It was because of her previous karmic association with Rindzin Nuden Dorje that she had come to the place where he stayed. When they met, she requested that he ordain her as a nun and that he cut her hair. This haircutting was symbolic of their union. After the ordination Rindzin went to the place known as Khandro Bumdzong and found all the hidden texts.

At one time there was one chapter of a text that Lama Rindzin

could not rediscover, and he told the monks to call the nun Yage Kunsang. At this time she had developed superknowledge and told the monks that it would not be necessary for her to go, because Lama Rindzin would be able to rediscover the text by himself. However, since it was her guru's command she went with the monks. The monks made a big procession as she was proceeding together with the *yogins*. Then, Lama Rindzin and Yage Kunsang performed a ritual together, which was another symbolic expression of their sexual union. Now, Lama Rindzin was able to rediscover the last chapter.

The nun Yage Kunsang Drolma practiced religion in the nunnery. While in retreat she mastered the *Dzogchen* practice called *Yangtig Nagpo*, the *Naro Chodrug*, and the *Ladrub Debai Dorje*. She stayed in retreat for the rest of her life. She kept her hair long. Because she was strictly following the *Vinaya* rules, she developed the smell characterizing very good *Vinaya* practitioners.<sup>28</sup> Lama Rindzin Nuden Dorje was a pure monk and Yage Kunsang was a pure nun. They both followed the *Vinaya* rules and they didn't commit any fault. People used to keep her hair as talisman and relief, but when they asked for her hair and clothes, she was reluctant to give.

#### 4.4. Practitioners of *Chö*

Several Tibetan nuns and *yoginīs* were known for their practice of *Chö*. The *Chö* teachings are based on the *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures which contain the essentials of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. G. Tucci states that the theoretical basis of *Chö* is opposed to that of other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In the theories of other schools, suffering is removed as a consequence of the destruction of moral defilements, while the opposite happens in *Chö*, where the destruction of suffering is seen as leading to a destruction of moral defilements.<sup>29</sup> *Chö*, which means to cut, aims at cutting away dualistic thinking at its roots. This is achieved through a meditation process involving two stages, first an invocation of fearful deities, and then a counter-action of the fear and horror brought about by these deities by understanding that they are a product of the human mind. This insight has to be experienced and cannot be achieved intellectually.<sup>30</sup>

The *chöpas* often performed their meditation and rituals in cemeteries, in an atmosphere that was supposed to strengthen the fear and illusive thinking that the adept in the second instance was to abolish. The *chöpas* were believed to be immune from diseases, and they would often mingle with beggars and lepers. They would be called upon to dispose of dead bodies and to stop epidemics.

Characteristic for the *chöpa* is the use of a small drum, the bell, and a small leg-bone trumpet. The Indian *yogin* Padampa Sangye is said to have introduced the *Chö* practice to Tibet, but it was Machig Labdron who firmly established and popularized the teaching.<sup>31</sup>

The nun Shugsep Lochen Rinpoche was a *Chö* practitioner. In the preface to her biography,<sup>32</sup> it is stated that she was the teacher of Sonam Topgay Kazi of Rhenock and his wife. After her death, Shugsep Lochen supposedly reincarnated in a daughter that was born to this couple. It is also stated that Jetsun Lochen was born either in 1853 or in 1865 and that she was the daughter of Don-drub Namgyal, a descendant of the Kheme family of Chongye. Unfortunately this biography has not been translated from Tibetan, and for the time being we have to rely on other scattered information about the life of this great nun adept.<sup>33</sup>

All my informants from Lhasa had heard about the famous Shugsep Lochen Rinpoche, and several of them had visited her nunnery.<sup>34</sup> Yutog Dorje Yudon had this to tell:

I met Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche several times. My mother used to go to Shugsep and she would take me with her. Mother told me about Jetsun Rinpoche's young days. Her mother divorced her father early, when Lochen Rinpoche was about thirteen years old. Then the mother took her daughter on a pilgrimage to western Tibet, to Gya Nyima where there is a lot of Nyingma practice. The mother and Jetsun Lochen were begging along the way, singing *Chö* and using the *damaru*. Lochen Rinpoche's voice was very sweet, and I loved to hear her sing. They later went on pilgrimage to all the holy places in western Tibet, and afterwards they came back to Lhasa. In Lhasa and in the whole central Tibetan province, Jetsun Lochen became famous. She was greatly respected as she was nonsectarian and she had a beautiful personality. Later on she went to Shugsep where she stayed for the rest of her life. The nuns managed the nunnery, and some of them owned *dzomo*,<sup>35</sup> while Jetsun herself had no property. They had a three storey house, and on the second floor there was an assembly hall where they performed offering rituals. On the third floor, Jetsunla had her wooden box, where she stayed meditating. It was placed in the centre of the room against the wall. The nuns came and sat around her on cushions. The nuns stayed in small retreat-huts that were situated not too close to each other on the mountain-side. When they needed religious teachings or advice they would come to Jetsun Lochen. She never closed the door, and even during the night the nuns and other people could come to her. They told her about their problems and she always listened. They all felt that she was like a mother.

Another informant, Ngawang Dondup Narkyid, told this about Lochen Rinpoche:

My mother was a disciple of Jetsun Lochen, and often went to visit her taking me with her. My mother was a follower of the Nyingmapa School, while my father belonged to the Gelugpa School. My father never came with us to visit Jetsun Lochen, but he never interfered with my mother's decision to give offerings to her. Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche was sitting on a kind of throne, and many important lamas came to visit her. In fame she is as important as Machig Labdron.<sup>36</sup>



*Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, the old chanting-master Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo, and the nun Thegchog Sangmo reciting Chö.*

The old chanting-master in Tilokpur Nunnery, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo, had spent two months at Jetsun Lochen's nunnery. She told:

Lochen Rinpoche had many disciples and she gave religious teachings. She was especially good at reciting *Chö* and she used the *damaru* and the bell in this prayer. She used to sit in a box, and she never went outside. She was covered behind a kind of curtain, and when people came to see her, she lifted the curtain. I heard that Gyalwa Karmapa had received initiations from her.

The retired chanting-master in the nunnery in Dharamsala, Ngawang Choezin, had been to Shugsep several times, and she told

that Lochen Rinpoche used to sit behind a curtain. When great sinners came to see her, she would ask them to go away without opening this curtain. Ngawang Choezin received several religious teachings from Jetsun Lochen.

## 4.5. Nuns in Prestigious Positions

### The Position of Abbess

There were very few recognized formal positions for nuns or other women religious specialists in Tibet. A well-known one was the state-recognized female incarnation of Dorje Phagmo (Vajravā-rāhī). She occupied the position as abbess of Samding Monastery, which was situated by Yamdok Lake.<sup>37</sup>

The Dorje Phagmo incarnation is considered an emanation of Tārā, but it has not been possible to reconstruct a complete list of the Dorje Phagmo lineage. Tashi Tsering states that there are indications that the Dorje Phagmo lineage started sometime in the fourteenth century, and this implies that the present Dorje Phagmo should be at least the twelfth incarnation. Among the Dorje Phagmo incarnations were Jetsun Thinley Tsomo, Jetsun Ngawang Rinchen Kunsang, and Chönyi Dechen Tsomo. Tashi Tsering informed me that the present incarnation, Dechen Chodon, was born in 1942.

Dechen Chodon, however, has attained a somewhat ambiguous position in the minds of Tibetans. When the Chinese made their influence felt in Tibet in the 1950's, they made Dorje Phagmo and the Panchen Lama occupy central positions in the Chinese-controlled Buddhist Society.<sup>38</sup> Dechen Chodon lives in Lhasa, where she is married and has three children. She has been given a prominent position in the political hierarchy of the "Tibetan Autonomous Region," and is reported to have officially dissociated herself from the position of a female incarnation.<sup>39</sup>

According to K. Dhondup and Tashi Tsering, one of the Dorje Phagmo incarnations is supposed to have been one of the major scholars produced by the Bodong School.<sup>40</sup> They write that one of the Dorje Phagmo incarnations wore the robe of a fully ordained monk (*gelong*), but they were required to keep their hair long.<sup>41</sup> Jetsun Chönyi Dechen Tsomo, who was probably the most capable of the Dorje Phagmo incarnations, was given the title of *Hu-tukthu* by the the Tibetan Government.<sup>42</sup> This is one of the most



*Dechen Chodon (b. 1942), the present incarnation of Dorje Phagmo.*

honoured titles of an incarnation.<sup>43</sup> To my knowledge, Dorje Phagmo is the only female incarnation that has been recognized by the Tibetan Government.<sup>44</sup>

Beside the Abbess of Samding and possibly an abbess at Namtso Chugmo,<sup>45</sup> Harrison Forman refers to a female abbot at Dragkar Monastery in Amdo, housing more than five hundred monks. Her name was Alakh Gongri Tsang, or Alakh Gongri Khandro, possibly born in the 1890's.<sup>46</sup> H. Forman's book of travel includes several unrealistic and fantastic stories, making one very sceptical about the information he gives about this female abbot. Tashi Tsering states that the fourth incarnation of Alakh Gongri Khandro whose name was Gongri Khandroma Konchog Rindzin Drolma (1814–1891), was very famous in Amdo. A disciple of hers, the famous lama Akhu Thabkhe Tenpa Gyatso (1825–1897), wrote a lengthy biography of her, which is now in Amdo. He was the tutor of the fifth incarnation, the one mentioned by H. Forman. Tashi Tsering has heard that the sixth incarnation is in her forties and is living in Amdo.

### Female Lineage-Holders

Some informants mentioned that in the Sakyapa tradition, there have been several accomplished female adepts. A couple of informants maintained that some of these women left behind writings. In the Sakya Khon family, the lineage of transmitting religious teachings is inherited, and women of the family are recognized as lineage-holders. Sakya Trizin, the present head of the Sakya lineage, is considered an incarnation of Mañjuśrī as well as of Padma-sambhava. His sister Jetsun Kusho Luding Chime (b. 1938) has been referred to as the emanation of Vajrayoginī, and like her brother, she is a lineage-holder of important religious teachings.<sup>47</sup>

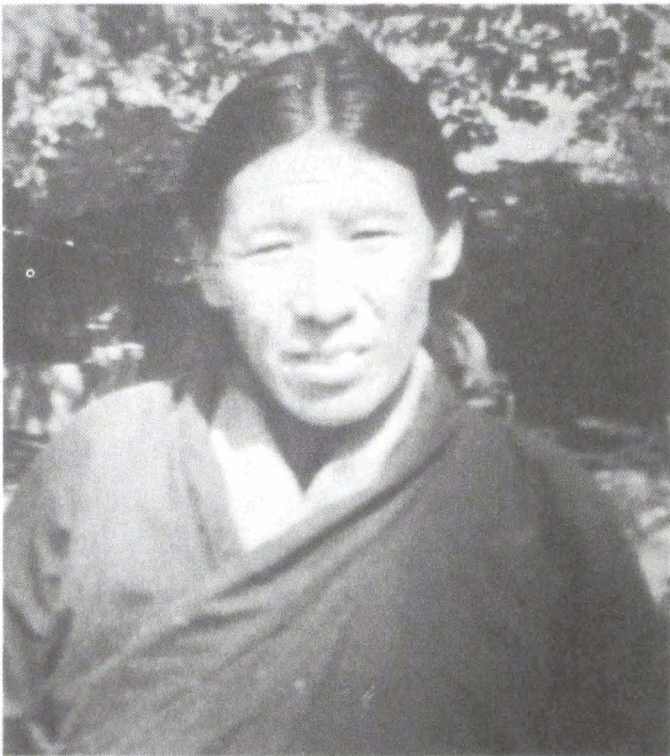
In order to continue the Sakya Khon family and their lineage of religious teachings, Jetsun Kusho was asked by her brother and by the Dalai Lama to marry. She now lives in Canada, and has given birth to five children. One of her sons is a lama and is living in India. Jetsun Kusho was requested to resume her religious teachings by Deshung Rinpoche and her brother, and today she has several disciples in Vancouver, Los Angeles, and Boston.

Besides Machig Labdron there are some references to a few other female lineage-holders in Tibetan historical works. Kandro

Peldzin who lived in the eighteenth century is reported to have been an incarnation of both Yeshe Tsogyal and Nangsa Obum. Kandro Peldzin was a practitioner of the Great Perfection, she was a lineage-holder, she had developed superknowledge, and her birth had been prophesied in the tantra *Drolthal Gyur*.<sup>48</sup>

### Female Incarnations

There are other female incarnations recognized only by the particular tradition they belong to, by a certain monastery or nunnery, by certain lamas or by local people. In the Karma Kagyu School, Khandro Rinpoche or Tsering Paldron, the daughter of Mindroling Tichen, is said to be an incarnation of Khandro Ogyen Tsomo, the consort of the Fifteenth Karmapa.<sup>49</sup> After finishing her university education, Khandro Rinpoche will be the leader of Karma Chokor Dechen, a nunnery in Sikkim that was completed and officially consecrated in December 1985.<sup>50</sup> Belonging to the Drigung Kagyu School, there is an incarnation of the nun Nene Choden Sangmo, Drigung Khandro, who stayed at Tsopema until



*Drigung Khandro (d. 1976), the incarnation of Nene Choden Sangmo.*



her death in 1976. Both the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa have recognized the daughter of Sonam Topgay Kazi, Jetsun Pema, as the incarnation of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche.<sup>51</sup>

We have little information about accomplished religious practitioners in the Sakyapa School. One informant mentioned an accomplished woman belonging to the Sakya tradition, Jetsun Tamdrin. She lived a few generations back, and was supposed to have been quite famous. Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche claimed that several of the Sakya *jetsunmas* were religious preachers. Informants gave the names of several highly realized female adepts, of whom we know little: Rindzin Thinley, the sister of Minling Lochen (1654–1718), Rindzin Chodon who lived in the eighteenth century, and Dokho Shabdrung Khandroma.

Per Kværne informed me that in the Bon religion, Khacho Wangmo (d. 1987), daughter of a lama in the incarnation-lineage of Kundrol Dragpa (b. 1700), is considered an incarnation of Dechen Wangmo (b. 1868), the wife of Sangngag Lingpa (b. 1864). He was a famous Bonpo *terton* living in the Nyarong district of Kham, where there are many Bonpos. Khacho Wangmo was a famous *tertonma*, she particularly rediscovered objects, both Bonpo and Nyingmapa. These objects were found in forty-three places, often in the presence of thousands of people. Khacho Wangmo was active in Nyarong and Kongpo. Under the Cultural Revolution, she was imprisoned for many years. In 1985 or 1986, she went on a long pilgrimage to Bonri in Kongpo, the holy mountain of the Bonpos.

#### 4.6. Nuns in Politics and Administration

Tibetan nuns are not only famous for their religious practice. Some nuns made their influence felt in politics and administration also. Thus women could in some cases, at least, inherit chieftainships.<sup>52</sup> One informant, a monk living in Kham, related that he knew about a nun chieftain who ruled until the Chinese occupation:

In Nagsho Tshogu there were nine chieftains and one of these was a powerful nun. She ruled the area of Narog until Tibet lost her independence in 1959. She administered the whole area and she was



*Khacho Wangmo, an accomplished female religious practitioner in the Donpo religion. She died in Tibet in 1987.*

helped by two male subjects, one dealing with local law and order and the other with the Central Government. These chieftains have the fourth rank of nobility in Tibetan society. Generally chieftainships were inherited from father to son, but in this case a nun was put in charge of this office, as there was no able male heir. Sometimes monks would inherit an office like this, and they would then usually disrobe.

That nuns held positions of power and were in possession of administrative abilities, is also evident from R.D. Taring's reference to the nun Champala who was in charge of the treasury at the main Horkhang estate.<sup>53</sup>

### Nuns as Freedom Fighters

Several nuns became well known because of their participation in the uprisings against the Chinese occupants. On the twelfth of March 1959, there was a women's revolt in Lhasa, and two nuns,

Galingshar Ani and Tsamgung Ani Yonten were among the leaders. Other nuns who participated in the demonstration were Sumtog Jetsunma, and Kunsang Tse Jetsunma. Marlam Nyenlag took part in the uprising, and she could especially remember Galingshar Ani, as she was one of the leaders of the division of twelve houses that my informant belonged to. She stated:

Galingshar Ani wore a red *chuba* and had shaved her head. She practiced religion mostly at home, but I think that she also had stayed in a nunnery. Galingshar Ani was very capable both in religion and in politics.<sup>54</sup>

Marlam Nyenlag also recalled that during the Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966–1976, there had been a revolt in Nyemoru Nunnery, which was situated about one day by horse from Lhasa. Thinley Chodon, a famous nun from this nunnery, was executed. A boy who had witnessed the legal procedure against nuns from Nyemoru told my informant this story:

The imprisonment of the nun Thinley Chodon was made a public event by the Chinese, and we Tibetans were made to witness it. Thinley Chodon's face was red with black spots and many people fell sick from looking at her. I myself became ill. She was looking very bold, keeping her head raised. She and many other nuns from Nyemoru Nunnery were executed and the nunnery was destroyed. After the revolt of Nyemoru the Chinese became very rude to nuns and destroyed many nunneries.

Tashi Tsering had this to tell about the nun Thinley Chodon (d. 1969?):

She was very powerful, and was the leader of people from a huge area. She was in command of an army which was responsible for killing many Chinese. She was occupying a kind of throne from which she gave her orders. In 1969 the Chinese found out that she had a network of contacts from the area of Mt. Kailash in the west to Kham in the east. There are rumors saying that Thinley Chodon was able to escape from the Chinese, and that another nun was executed in her place. If this rumor is correct, then nobody knows where she is now.<sup>55</sup>

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## A Tibetan Nunnery in Exile

### 5.1. Introduction

According to a survey published by the Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs of H.H. the Dalai Lama, there were 154 monasteries with altogether 653 nuns, 6337 monks, and 2311 tantrists belonging the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in India, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan before 1959. The number of Tibetan refugee monasteries established in these areas after 1959 amounts to 149, including 340 nuns, 6278 monks, and 653 tantrists.<sup>1</sup> Only four exile nunneries have been established in India,<sup>2</sup> and this chapter deals with the daily life and organization in one of these.

### 5.2. The Establishment of Karma Drubgyu Targye Ling

Karma Drubgyu Targye Ling, or the Mahāyāna Buddhist Nunnery as it is also called, belongs to the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. The nunnery was started in the Gita Cottage in Dalhousie, Himachal Pradesh, in 1962. In 1968, the nunnery was moved to Tilokpur, an Indian village about twenty miles southwest of Dharamsala. The nunnery is situated on a hilltop overlooking a river gorge. Down by the river there are several holy caves, one of which supposedly was used by the Indian saint Tilopa. Because of the holy caves, Tilokpur is considered an auspicious place both by Indians and by Buddhists, and every year quite a few Buddhist pilgrims, both Tibetan and western, come to visit. The auspiciousness of the place is reported to have been the main reason for establishing the nunnery here. Lama Karma Thinley, the former abbot of the nunnery, related the following about the establishment of the nunnery:

It was the idea of His Holiness Karmapa to start a nunnery in Dalhousie, where many of the Tibetan refugees had gathered in the early six-

ties, after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. H.H. Karmapa had asked the advice of the British woman Freda Bedi if there was a need for establishing a nunnery, and she put a lot of effort into this project. At that time, both Akong Rinpoche and myself had thought of starting a nunnery. This idea was initiated in New Delhi in 1961–62, where I stayed to teach at the Young Lama's Home School. As the Young Lama's Home School was going to be moved to Dalhousie, we also thought of establishing the nunnery there.

Although the nunnery was a Karma Kagyu nunnery from the beginning, we decided to admit nuns from all the different Schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The late Ling Rinpoche, the Senior Tutor of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, had the responsibility for sending Gelugpa nuns. Sakya Trizin, the present head of the Sakyapa School, sent a couple of nuns. His Holiness Karmapa sent a few experienced nuns from Rumtek, Sikkim. They had been trained in the duties respectively of chanting-master, disciplinarian, and shrine-keeper. The latter were to help the nuns in the newly established nunnery in Dalhousie to get organized.

At the time I was teaching the young lamas, but as I got more involved in establishing the nunnery, I was asked to be their abbot. Soon I spent all my time and effort in the nunnery. It was the idea of His Holiness Karmapa to move the nunnery to Tilokpur, which is an old pilgrimage site where Tilopa used to meditate. With the help of Freda Bedi the nunnery was moved to Tilokpur in 1968.

There thus seems to be different people involved in the establishment of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Nunnery: several high lamas, a British woman, and the nuns themselves. The old chanting-master, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo and several other nuns regard Mrs. Bedi as their founder, but they maintain that it was H.H. Karmapa's idea to start a nunnery and that it was his idea to move the nunnery to Tilokpur.

### **Bhikshuni Karma Kechog Palmo (Mrs. Freda Bedi)**

The nuns say that Bhikshuni Karma Kechog Palmo collected the money for building the nunnery, and due to her efforts the nunnery was started so soon after Tibet lost her independence. During the first years in exile, most Tibetans were very poor, and several of the Tibetan nuns were engaged in road construction to make a living. The only other exile nunnery established in the area, Geden Choeling in Dharamsala, was only started in 1976. This nunnery was built on Tibetan initiative, mainly as the result

of the efforts of two Tibetan nuns who had stayed in Nechungri Nunnery in Lhasa.

Freda Bedi was born as Freda Swan in 1909 in Derby, England. She graduated from St. Hugh's College, Oxford, with a M.A. degree in English and Journalism. She also studied a couple of years at Sorbonne in Paris. Freda Swan met her husband, Mr. Bedi, an Indian Sikh, at Oxford and together they went to India. Freda Bedi was appointed Executive Editor of the Indian Government's magazine *Social Welfare*. When China occupied Tibet and refugees started coming to India, she was appointed by Prime Minister Nehru to help take care of the refugees at the Indian borders. Freda Bedi continued her work among the Tibetan refugees, and in 1961 she became the director of the Young Lama's Home School. The purpose of the school was to train the young reincarnate lamas from the four different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. This school was started in New Delhi. Because of the hot climate in Delhi, the Young Lama's Home School was moved to Dalhousie. In 1963 at the request of H.H. Karmapa, Freda Bedi founded the Tibetan Mahāyāna Nunnery in Dalhousie. In the beginning, thirty nuns who were staying at Buxaduar refugee camp, and twelve nuns who were staying in Dalhousie, joined the nunnery. In 1968 the nunnery was moved to Tilokpur. Mrs. Bedi had a close friendship with H.H. Karmapa and he gave her the novice ordination and the new name Karma Kechog Palmo. In 1972, she went to Hong Kong to get her *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Sherpa Rinpoche, who was a student at the Young Lama's Home School, had this to say about Mrs. Bedi:

She fitted well into the Indian upper class. She had contact with several of the embassies and she was close to the Nehru family. The young lamas were therefore often invited to different embassies and to the Nehru residence. Mrs. Bedi was assisted by volunteer British teachers in starting the Young Lama's Home School, and when this fell apart, she started the nunnery. I think she became a nun in the late sixties. Kechog Palmo was very dignified and kind, and she tried to play the role of a mother to the young lamas. We affectionately called her mummy.

The nuns in Tilokpur referred to Freda Bedi as Sister Kechog Palmo, and they talked about her with great respect. They also called her mummy. This nickname originated in Dalhousie, when Sister Palmo opened the nunnery for young Tibetan orphan girls.

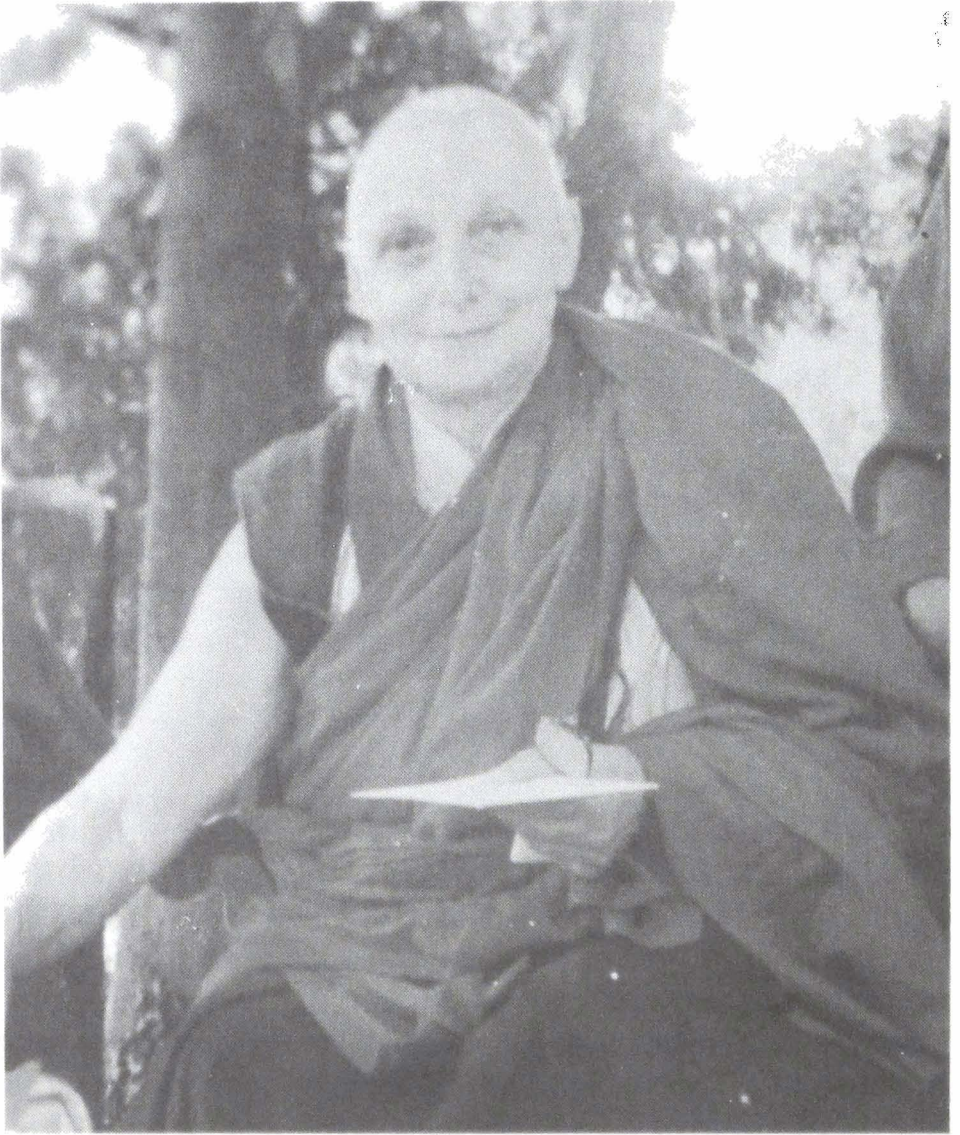
One of the nuns in Tilokpur stressed that Sister Palmo took care of them as if they were her own children, and she wanted them to call her mummy. Freda Bedi did not spend much time in the nunnery, where she had her own little house. During summers, when it is very hot in Tilokpur, she went to the Rumtek Monastic Centre in Sikkim. She also travelled throughout the world, trying to start Tibetan friendship groups and visiting different Buddhist institutions. Freda Bedi died in New Delhi on the twenty-sixth of March, 1977. One of the Tilokpur nuns who was very fond of Kechog Palmo told the following:

H.H.Karmapa once said that Sister Kechog Palmo was the emanation of White Tārā. I have heard that when she died, her body shrank, indicating the manifestation of the rainbow-body. In her ashes they found a forehead-bone in which the letter A could be seen. The situation of the nuns would have been much better if Sister Palmo had lived today.

### The Hardships During the First Years at Tilokpur

Moving the nunnery from mountainous Dalhousie to Tilokpur in the low country, was a great strain for many of the nuns. Several of them got sick, as they were not used to the hot summers in the Kangra Valley. In the beginning, while the concrete buildings of the nunnery were being made, the nuns were living in grass huts and tents. The first years were filled with hardship, and soon after they were established in Tilokpur, the nunnery burnt down. Among the most precious things lost in the fire was an appliqué, two stories high, of Amitābha. The Sikkimese nun, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, told me the following about her first years in Tilokpur:

When I came here in 1972, the nuns were still striving hard to build up the nunnery. We took part in the construction of the different buildings, and we carried sand and building materials from the road and up the steep steps (164 steps) to the nunnery. A few porters were hired from the village to help in the construction, otherwise we did the work ourselves. Most of the nuns were very poor, and our food was poor. We used to eat a paste consisting of radishes and poor flour. We could not afford to buy rice. From the US government we received some bulgar wheat, but when we cooked it, a lot of bugs came to the surface of the pot. We kept two buffaloes for the milk, and had to take turns herding them, which meant that we had to sleep out in the open. We



*Bhikshuni Karma Kechog Palmo (Mrs. Freda Bedi), the founder of Tilokpur Nunnery.*

also grew some of our own vegetables and we took turns gathering firewood for cooking.

The nun Yeshe Palmo related the following from those years:

We had to go far away to the Indian village with big sacks to buy straw. When the sacks were filled, they were almost as big as ourselves. On an empty stomach we had to carry them to the nunnery. Every now and then we would almost fall over. Both my friend Pema and I used to cry. Neither of us was used to this kind of work. Then the whole day long we had to take care of the buffaloes. Sometimes



they would break into Indian fields, it was a big hazzle to get them out. The Indians would get quite angry at us.

### 5.3. Recruitment to the Tilokpur Nunnery

#### The Nuns Ordained in Tibet

Of the thirty-three nuns staying in Tilokpur Nunnery in 1984, eight had been nuns in Tibet. Three of these, the late nun Changchub Chodon (1910–1987), the old chanting-master Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo (b.1916), and the abbess Karma Hoser (b.1948), came from the same nunnery in Tibet, Chedo Nunnery in Nyemo.<sup>3</sup> Ogyen (b. 1928) came from Dingri and had stayed in a Nyingmapa nunnery of Thukse Rinpoche. Tsultrim Sangmo (b.1935) came from Gyalton in Kham. The late nun Gacho (1926–1985) came from Drongpa in northern Tibet. Pema Wangmo (b. 1938) and Pema Sangmo (b. 1940) were both ordained in Tibet.

#### The Nuns Recruited in Exile

The twenty-five remaining nuns in Tilokpur are aged between seventeen and thirty-eight.<sup>4</sup> Ten of these were born in Tibet. Except for one Sikkimese, two Bhutanese nuns, one nun from Kinnaur, and two nuns from Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh), they are recruited from among Tibetans in the different refugee settlements throughout India, Nepal, and Sikkim. The nuns are mainly recruited from among followers of the Kagyupa tradition. The families of eleven of the refugee nuns came from western Tibet, two came from Dingri, and the rest from various other places in Tibet.

Of the twenty-five younger nuns, eleven are orphans, and several others come from families with only one parent. When Freda Bedi was living, she took care of several small children who came from very poor families or who were orphans. Yeshe Palmo stated:

For a period of time, the nunnery seemed to be more like a nursery than a nunnery. We had to get up in the middle of the night and change diapers on the little ones. There was lots of work to be done. Finally the elder nuns were given responsibility for the little children. Some of the kids were put in the nunnery by their parents so they could be fed. When they were old enough to earn a living, they were



*Tilokpur nuns after having received the blessing of H.H. the Dalai Lama.*

taken out. Some of the orphans are still in the nunnery. Today, there might be a couple of nuns in the nunnery who are here because they have nowhere else to go, they have no education or relatives.

Apart from the very poor children who were taken care of in the nunnery, there were several orphan schoolgirls who were invited by Freda Bedi to visit the nunnery and spend their holidays there. They were attending the Tibetan school in Dalhousie.<sup>5</sup> The girls could choose if they wanted to become nuns, and there were ten of them who undertook ordination. They came to Tilokpur for the first time in 1969. Today, four of these girls are left in Tilokpur.

#### Restrictions on Admittance

In Tilokpur there are no nuns who have formerly been married. Earlier there used to be some *genchö* nuns (women who have taken ordination when becoming old),<sup>6</sup> but one young informant

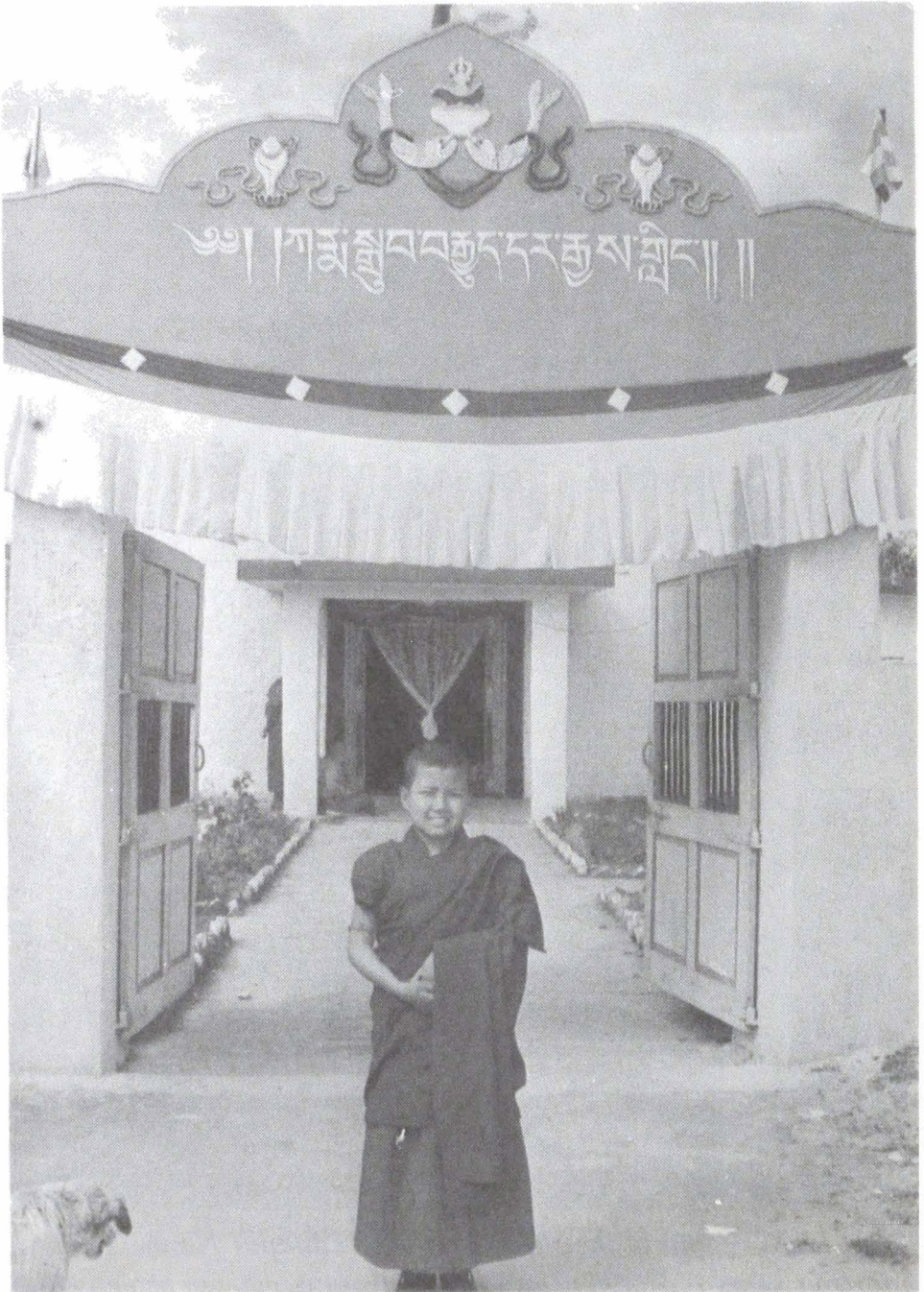
stated that because it was difficult for them to adjust to the life in the nunnery, they left to stay elsewhere. The nuns are not eager to admit *genchö* nuns. The reason for this was given by a couple of the nuns:

Since they have been living a lay life they have their own set ideas about how to organize their life. Thus it is not so easy for them to adjust to the rules of the nunnery. The ones that have been nuns from when they were quite young, however, have been trained according to monastic discipline and they generally do not have problems adjusting.

One of the nuns maintained that *genchö* nuns are no longer admitted to the nunnery, while another nun stressed that there are no restrictions on admitting *genchö* nuns, but the nunnery does not admit children under eight years, very handicapped nuns, or very old nuns. The nunnery has to restrict admittance in this way because they do not have the economic resources to take care of members who cannot take part in the daily activities of the nunnery. It was stressed by several informants that since monks and nuns are religious specialists, their main objective is to perform religious work. Some years back, when the nunnery was partly functioning as a “nursery,” the nuns did not have sufficient time for the religious recitations.

One Tilokpur nun informed me that the nunnery has been open also for very poor nuns. In 1983 a few poor nuns from Tawang had been admitted. They were Gelugpa nuns, but because of space problems and their poor economy they had been turned away at the nunnery in Dharamsala. When I was visiting Geden Choeling in Dharamsala, there were about seventy nuns belonging to the nunnery, but many of them had to stay outside the nunnery as there was no room for them.<sup>7</sup> At that time the situation was a little better in Tilokpur and the nuns were admitted here. One of these poor nuns became very sick and the nuns had to send her back to her home. The Tilokpur nuns had to spend their personal money to buy her train ticket, and I got the impression that this was a heavy burden on an already strained economy.

Lately, several nuns have come from Tibet and they want to settle in India. They are very poor and have no education. Both the Dharamsala Nunnery and the nunnery in Tilokpur are overcrowded and it was maintained in both nunneries that it was impossible for them to house more nuns. This is partly the reason



*One of the young Tilokpur nuns, Dekyi Yangdzom from Mon Tawang. She is fourteen years old (1989).*

why Situ Rinpoche wants to build a new nunnery in Tilokpur. Nevertheless, since I left Tilokpur, sixteen nuns have been admitted, the youngest being five years old (1989). They are mainly recruited from refugee families. The younger ones are tutored by elder nuns.



*Demcho Wangmo in the shrine-room of Tilokpur Nunnery. She is fourteen years old (1989) and comes from a Tibetan settlement in South India.*

### *5.3.1. Motivation for Becoming a Nun*

To the question why she wanted to become a nun, one of the orphans, Yeshe Palmo, who is in her early thirties, stated:

I was born in Tibet in an area called Yagra, close to Mt. Kailash. We were four children and my mother died when I was two months old.

Our father was alive, but he went off with another woman, and we were left with our grandparents. I was eight or nine years old when we had to escape because of the Chinese occupation. On the way to Nepal, my grandmother died, and later on also my grandfather passed away. I was then in the care of my uncle and my aunt. My little sister died in Dolpatan in Nepal. My father also escaped from Tibet, but as he became very ill, we children were counted as orphans. We finally came to Dharamsala, and there the group of orphan children were scattered in different schools. Some were sent to Switzerland. We were sent about like packages, and we did not know what was going to happen to us. I lost contact with one of my brothers, and we didn't meet again until sixteen years later. By the time I found him, he had forgotten that he had a sister.

I started school when I was twelve years old, and the two first years I attended a school in Nepal. Later I was sent to the Tibetan school in Dalhousie. In school, I was very lonely. I had no relatives to take care of me, I had no money and I had nowhere to go. While the other children were receiving visitors and were taken for holidays, I used to sit and cry. Before I knew that there was a nunnery, I always thought that I should become a nun. The lamas were teaching about how our existence is all suffering, and this teaching I could very well understand. I thought that when there is a chance, I will become a nun.

I was very happy when Freda Bedi invited us orphan girls to Tilokpur, not just because I wanted to go for a holiday, but because this was my chance of becoming a nun. Even as a small child, I always liked to play with religious objects. I used to make offering cakes out of *tsampa*. Especially, I liked to play with some coloured stones that were red and yellow. As you know, these are the colours used by the Tibetan monks and nuns. Sometimes I pretended that I had invited lamas, and I used different pots and pans that I beat with a ladle, to make it sound like ritual music. This was my main way of playing every day, so I think that already from childhood I wanted to lead a religious life.

Another of the orphan nuns who attended the school in Dalhousie, Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo, related:

When I was two years old, my mother and father separated, and I was taken care of by my mother. I was only two years old when we escaped to India in 1959, and my mother carried me on her back all the way. Then, my mother became very ill, and she died when I was nine years old. By the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I got the chance to join the Central Tibetan School in Dalhousie. In school we were given reading and writing books and food. When I was twelve years old I decided to become a nun. Freda Bedi, the founder of our nunnery, had told the Tibetan principal at the school, Samdong Rinpoche, that she would receive schoolgirls in the nunnery during holidays, and that if

there were some who wanted to become nuns, they could come to the nunnery later on. I was very glad to hear this news, because I wanted very much to become a nun. When I was a little girl, I was always running after the lamas and nuns. In our religion, it is very important to obtain the permission from our parents if we want to become a nun or a monk. I was not hindered in my wish of becoming a nun, since I had no one to ask for permission.

The nun Yeshe Palmo told the following story of one of the Tilokpur nuns who was ordained in Tibet. This nun prefers anonymity, and we will therefore call her Chotso:

Chotso's father was very learned and he wanted his sons to become monks. He taught them to read and write, and instructed them in various religious subjects. Chotso wanted very much to learn, but because she was only a girl, her father didn't think it was important for her to learn anything. While her brothers could spend their time studying, her mother made her work very hard in the house. However, Chotso wanted so much to learn and when she was about ten years old she ran away to an uncle, a monk, who lived in retreat in a cave. From him she learnt meditation. However, Chotso missed her family, and she went back and stayed with them until she was eighteen. In the meantime she had taken the novice ordination. When she was eighteen years she again went to the cave and did a three-year retreat. When her family came to India, Chotso came to Dalhousie, but didn't want to settle in the nunnery. However, Lama Karma Thinley persuaded her to stay in the nunnery, and when it was moved to Tilokpur, she came there. In Tilokpur she has taken care of one of the orphan children. In 1980 Chotso went to a settlement in the Himalayas and she has been living in retreat there since then. She lives in a small hut and meditates in a little box. She only leaves her hut to visit the monastery nearby.

The Sikkimese nun, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, told this about why she became a nun:

My grandparents were very pious, my father is a married lama and one of my brothers is an artist who paints religious pictures, so from when I was very small, I was used to a religious atmosphere. From when I was little, I wanted to become a nun. I liked the monk robes very much, and I used to put them on. I did not learn any practical chores at home, as I thought that these were not needed in a nunnery. My family did not think that I was serious, and they sent me to school. They told me that I should go to school for one year and then I could become a nun. Then they told me to continue at school for another year, and then still another year, until I became fifteen years old. My sister tried to persuade me not to become a nun. She told me that I could get all the nice clothes and things that I wanted. Also, she said

that in a nunnery the nuns have to work very hard and that they wear rags. This, however, could not change my mind.

My mother died when I was fifteen years old, and I was finally taken to Rumtek Monastery to see H.H. Karmapa. My family told him that I wanted to become a nun, and he said that this was very good. My family was afraid that I would disrobe, since I had been growing up in a modern society and I was used to that kind of life. However, H.H. Karmapa said he would take that responsibility. H.H. Karmapa made a very strong impression on me, and he gave me the novice ordination in October 1972. I was given instructions by Trangu Rinpoche, who was the former abbot of Rumtek Monastery. He now has a monastery in Nepal. I was going to go on a pilgrimage together with H.H. Karmapa and several others, but it seems they forgot about me, and I was sent to Tilokpur.

The nun Tsultrim Palmo, also in her early thirties, told me why she came to Tilokpur:

I had been very sick from hepatitis. I decided to go to Tilokpur, where I met Lama Karma Thinley and I asked him what to do about my illness. Karma Thinley Rinpoche did a divination and said that if I became a nun, I would get better. My family said that it was my own choice whether I wanted to become a nun. After I took ordination in 1980, my health has continually improved.

The nun Tendzin Chodon, thirty-three years old, was ordained as a novice together with Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo in 1983. She stressed the suffering in lay life as the reason why she became a nun:

Married life is not good, there is much suffering. My brother has had a lot of suffering because he has lost four children. When the Buddha was living, a woman who had lost her child came to him. The Buddha told her to go out in the world and try to find a family where there was no suffering. She could not find one. Because of all this suffering in lay life, I wanted to become a nun. When I came back to visit my mother after having become a nun, she prostrated before me.

One of the Bhutanese nuns said that when her mother ran away from their family, her father decided to become a monk. He told his children about the suffering in marriage, and he wanted his three daughters to become nuns. Two of them are presently in Tilokpur Nunnery.

The nun Monlam Sangmo, twenty-three years old, became a nun of her own will. Her father died in Tibet, and her mother was



very worried after his death. She has two brothers in Nepal who are married. She was unhappy living a family life and she decided to become a nun. She came to Tilokpur in 1981. Likewise Bhikshuni Karma Dechen (twenty-seven years old) from Kinnaur, was dissatisfied with lay life. The nun Karma Chodon (twenty-six years old), also decided to become a nun by herself. She has two elder sisters and one elder brother. Her family was very happy that she wanted to become a nun and gave their permission. She became a nun when she was twelve years old.

Most of the nuns I talked with stressed that it was their own wish to become nuns, and sometimes their parents had tried to hold them back. Suffering in lay life was the most common reason for renouncing it.

### 5.3.2. *Ordination*

In Tilokpur, all the nuns have taken formal vows. When a girl wants to become a nun, she will usually undergo a haircutting ceremony and take the basic (*genyen*) vows, which can be taken by lay people as well as monastics. According to one of the former head nuns, there is no lower age limit for taking these lay vows, while girls have to be ten years to obtain the novice (*getsulma*) ordination.

After taking lay vows, undergoing the hair-cutting ceremony, and taking on robes, nuns are admitted to nunneries. Usually they wait several years before they take the more extensive novice vows. Most of the nuns in Tilokpur are novices, and they have received this ordination from the Sixteenth Karmapa.

Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo is one of the orphan girls from Dalhousie whom Freda Bedi invited to Tilokpur. When Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo was still in school in Dalhousie, she committed herself to a number of lay vows. She shaved her head, but wore the blue school uniform. There were also several other nuns in the Tibetan school in Dalhousie, and they all wore school uniforms. In 1977 Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo left school and joined the nunnery. In 1983, together with two other nuns from Tilokpur, she obtained the novice ordination from H.E. Situ Rinpoche at Sherab Ling.

Another of the Dalhousie orphans, the nun Yeshe Palmo, was given eight lay vows by H.H. Karmapa in 1970. Like Bhikshuni

Wangchuk Palmo she continued her education. After completing her fourth grade in Dalhousie, she was sent to the All Saints' School in Nainital. In 1972, she wanted to take the novice ordination. H.H. Karmapa told her that she could either continue her studies, or be ordained and join the nunnery. Yeshe Palmo felt that becoming a novice was more important than going to school, so she was given the ordination.

In Tibet it was also the custom for girls who wanted to become nuns to undertake the lay vows and wait for several years before they decided to take the novice ordination. Thus Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo took the lay vows when she was twelve years old (1928) and was ordained a novice when she was seventeen. It is also possible to take the novice ordination directly, as in the case of Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim. She was given the novice vows in 1972 by H.H. Karmapa, and she joined the nunnery in Tilokpur the same year. She recalled:

I was ordained by H.H. Karmapa in October 1972. There were four or five boys and myself undertaking ordination. The day before we were given instructions on the proceedings. The day of the ordination we started very early. I was quite nervous. Our robes, neatly folded, were to be worn after the ceremony. The lama gave us three small pieces of cloth stitched together, the symbol of our robe, and a brand new white scarf. This little bag of cloth is always to be worn. Then we took the Three Refuges and prostrated ourselves three times in the four directions. Afterwards we offered fruit, biscuits, and sweets in the begging bowl in front of the lama. The lama held the small bag of cloth, the symbol of the robe, against his own robe and gave a blessing. Now we were worthy of our robes. After that, the lama gave us an initiation to a text (*lung*). The lama asked for our old names three times, and he gave us new names to which we had to answer. Then we did prostrations to the lamas and gave offerings of tea, food, money, butterlamps and the like. Only the high lamas can give this ordination.

Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo was ordained in March 1982 together with two other nuns from Tilokpur:

The ordination was given by Situ Rinpoche and four lamas. Situ Rinpoche said that it was a very important day because he was giving the novice vows. The proceedings were very much the same as related by Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim. The lama said a prayer, we prostrated and offered fruit and sweets in the begging bowl. Rinpoche put his own shawl around us three nuns, then the other monastic robes. He blessed the square cloths that we are to sit on during prayers. Then we put the

blessed scarfs around our necks, Situ Rinpoche said a prayer, we went into a room and put our robes on. Then we went back to Rinpoche, who said a new prayer and we gave offerings to the four lamas. The next day we gave tea-offerings to the monks in the temple.

Since I left Tilokpur, eight nuns have gone to Hong Kong to obtain the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination.<sup>8</sup>

While I visited the Bonpo community in Dolanji in February 1984, I met a young woman, Shika, who had come all the way from Tibet in order to be ordained as a nun. She seemed to be a very serious religious practitioner, and in the mornings she could often be seen doing full prostrations around the monastery. She was ordained a nun on the fifteenth of March 1984. The ordination started at 5 a.m. in the residence of the abbot, Sangye Tendzin. The abbot and four fully ordained monks were present. Shika arrived in her new robes, with a towel wrapped around her head. She had shaved the day before, but left a tuft of hair to be cut by the abbot.<sup>9</sup> The monks started to recite from a text (*'Dul-ba'i Las-chog*), while Shika prostrated continuously. Then the abbot asked her if she had been given permission to become a nun by her parents and elders, whether she was perfect in body etc. The questions were put to her three times and she answered in chorus with the four monks present. Then the twenty-five vows were given to her. Next she was given her new name Tendzin Tsomo, repeated to her three times by the abbot and the monks, and then the abbot cut the remaining tuft of hair. She was handed several items, signifying her new status: a begging bowl, a maroon cloth, a razor, a piece of wood, a staff, a shawl etc. The abbot prayed over her rosary and gave it back to her. The ordination finished at 6:30 a.m., and then tea and *tsampa* were served. A few days after her ordination, Tendzin Tsomo set out on a pilgrimage.<sup>10</sup>

## 5.4. The Organization of Tilokpur Nunnery

### The Buildings

The nunnery consists of a temple, the Mahākāla<sup>11</sup> chapel, a kitchen, a guest-room, the late Bhikshuni Kechog Palmo's house, and the living quarters for the nuns. Kechog Palmo's room is today used when high lamas visit the nunnery. A part of the house is used as store-room, while there are two rooms for housing nuns

on the ground floor. Just below the nunnery there is a separate guest-house, with four big rooms, only two of which can be used today. The abbess, Karma Hoser, the old chanting-master, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo, and the Sikkimese nun, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, each have their own room, while the other nuns are from two to five in one room. In the rooms of the nuns, there are personal altars where the nuns keep ceremonial items and pictures of Bodhisattvas, *dākinīs*, and important lamas.



*Tilokpur nuns in front of the temple. (Photo Per Kværne).*

#### 5.4.1. *The Duties*

##### The Disciplinarian

There are several duties that rotate among the nuns. Generally, each nun serves in one duty for two or three years. There is one disciplinarian (*chötrimpa*) who enforces the rules of the nunnery. She has considerable authority. The disciplinarian oversees that there is no disorder during the prayers and that all the nuns are present at rituals. If she is absent from the shrine-room, the elder nuns will take care of the discipline. The disciplinarian can scold the nuns if they break a rule. This is the most common form of punishment. Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, who was serving as disciplinarian during my time in Tilokpur, maintained that because the Tilokpur nuns were so good, scoldings were generally not neces-

sary. If nuns come too late for the rituals in the shrine-room, they have to perform prostrations corresponding to how many minutes they are late.

In the case of particularly serious offences, the four head nuns, and sometimes all the nuns in the nunnery, will discuss the matter and decide on the punishment. In some cases the nuns ask the advice of their chief lama, Situ Rinpoche. The punishment for grave offences is that the nun in question has to offer a certain amount of butter lamps, and that she has to do a specific job for a certain amount of time, for instance clean the courtyard and the toilets for one year, or make bread for all the nuns for one year.

The disciplinarian rings a bell every evening to let the nuns know that the time for study has begun, and she will check that they are doing their studies. If a nun wants to leave the nunnery to see her family, a doctor, or to go shopping in a different village, she will have to ask the disciplinarian or the abbess for permission. When the abbess wants to go for a holiday or a pilgrimage she will ask the disciplinarian to obtain leave, and vice versa. This is a way in which the two nuns show mutual respect. In case of illness, a nun has to inform the disciplinarian and ask if she may be absent from the daily recitation.

The rules that the nuns in Tilokpur follow were put into writing by Ayang Rinpoche, serving as the representative of H.H. Karmapa and Situ Rinpoche. Ayang Rinpoche formulated the rules together with the abbess Karma Hoser and some of the other head nuns in Tilokpur. The main rules are the following:

1. The nuns are not allowed to go out of the gate of the nunnery after 7 or 7:30 p.m., unless there is a special reason.
2. The nuns are not allowed to watch movies.
3. All the nuns should gather for prayers in the morning, afternoon, and evening unless they are sick. If a nun is late for prayers, she should prostrate in front of the shrine while all the nuns are chanting.
4. A nun must ask the permission of the abbess or the disciplinarian when she wants a special holiday. The nuns should take turns going for holidays. They are not supposed to stay longer than the period decided. They must come back right after the holiday. If they do not, they have to pay a fine to the nunnery of one rupee for each day's overstay. The holiday period is

maximum four months. If for some reason a nun should need to be absent for a longer period, she should send a letter to the nunnery asking for permission, and stating the reason why she has to stay away longer.

5. Men or boys are not allowed to sleep in the nun's rooms, even if they are relatives.
6. All the nuns must take turns in performing the duties of the nunnery.
7. The nuns are not allowed to make noise inside the shrine-room or the Mahākāla room.

If a nun does not follow the rules and regulations of the nunnery she will be given warnings, and if she does not improve her behaviour she will be expelled. Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim stated that no nuns have been expelled from the nunnery, although there have been occasional disciplinary problems.

### The Kitchen Duty

At all times there are two nuns in the office of *nyerpa*, that is, serving in the kitchen. Earlier, each nun was responsible for her own cooking. Today, however, meals are made in the common kitchen, and all the nuns take their food from here. In the morning Indian bread (*chappati*) is served, for lunch there is usually vegetables or lentils (*dal*) and rice, and for dinner there is rice soup. In addition, the nunnery provides the nuns with tea, both Tibetan and sweet Indian tea, four times a day. When I was in Tilokpur, the two nuns working in the kitchen and the disciplinarian paid extra to get a full meal at supper instead of the rice soup that all the nuns get free from the nunnery. These three nuns had all their meals in the kitchen, while the others were eating in the courtyard or in their rooms.

The nuns have employed a local Indian to help the *nyerpas* with the cooking. He was employed for the first time in 1981, when H.H. the Dalai Lama came to visit Tilokpur. Since he was doing a good job, the nuns decided to let him keep it. The duty of the cook is to clean all the pots and to keep the earth-stove in proper shape. Together with the two *nyerpas*, he prepares all the meals. Generally he will do all the heavy work, and he carries out orders given by the *nyerpas*. The meals prepared in the kitchen are usu-

ally Indian-style. If the nuns want Tibetan food, they will have to do their own cooking and pay the expenses themselves.

The *nyerpas* have to do all the shopping of food for the nunnery. The most experienced *nyerpa* has the responsibility of keeping account of the money at their disposal. She has to keep a close eye on expenditures so that there will be a balance when they are released from their duty at the Tibetan New Year. The *nyerpas* also take care of visitors and serve them meals. When lamas or other important people come to Tilokpur, they must prepare especially good food, and they are then assisted by other nuns. When tea offerings are given, the *nyerpas* will prepare Tibetan tea made from Tibetan tea-leaves.

For *Losar*, the Tibetan New Year, the *nyerpas* are responsible for buying and making food for the celebration. The nuns start preparations for *Losar* a long time ahead. This is the time for whitewashing the shrine-room, making Tibetan cookies (*kapse*), making new prayerflags and cleaning the courtyard. The *nyerpas* take part in all this.

Several nuns claimed that the kitchen duty is very strenuous and carry a lot of responsibility. Some thought it very difficult to make the food-money last and to make the budget balance. A couple of nuns mentioned that they were very nervous when they were responsible for preparing food for high lamas. All the nuns, except the head nuns, new nuns who have not yet learnt recitation, and the *nyerpas*, are expected to take part in the daily rituals.

### The Shrine-keeper

The shrine-keeper (*chöpön*) is responsible for keeping the shrine-room in order, and for preparing the offering cakes (*torma*) and all the ritual implements used during the daily chanting. After breaks, she has the duty of summoning the nuns for a new session of prayers. She then beats a gong while circumambulating the shrine-room. Every day during the ritual recitation in Tilokpur, the nun serving as shrine-keeper moves quietly about her chores, cleaning and moving back and forth the different sacred objects used for the rituals. When she has finished, she sits down and participates in the recitation.

### The Shrine-keeper's Assistant

The shrine-keeper's assistant (*chöyog*) is the helper of the shrine-keeper. When the duties change at the Tibetan New Year she becomes the next shrine-keeper, and therefore she has to learn how to perform these duties properly. Generally, the assistant in the beginning of her period of duty will do all the menial tasks like cleaning, but as she becomes more experienced her responsibility increases.

### The Duty of Performing the Mahākāla Prayer

The nunnery in Tilokpur has its own Mahākāla chapel. The room is very small, approximately three by two meters. It is placed on the right-hand side of the shrine-room and has its own entrance. There is a statue of Mahākāla, placed in a glass cupboard. There are also several different religious paintings and pictures of Mahākāla in the room. The Tibetan term for this duty is *gonkhang sokhen* and the name of the Mahākāla worshipped in Tilokpur is Gonpo Bernagcan. On the left, coming in the room, there are several statues of Tibetan saints and deities. On the right is the altar to Mahākāla, where offering cakes, offering bowls, incense, butter lamps, and other ritual implements are placed in the prescribed manner.

Every day before sunset the Mahākāla prayer is performed by two nuns. The Mahākāla prayer has to be performed every day, even on holidays. When there is a picnic or some other arrangement away from the nunnery, someone invariably has to stay behind to perform this prayer. Even though two nuns are generally needed, one nun can perform the recitation if necessary.

During the Mahākāla recitation, ritual instruments are used, a drum and two different sets of cymbals. The two nuns who perform the Mahākāla prayer are responsible for making the appropriate offering cakes. They are also responsible for keeping the room, the ritual objects, and the statues clean. In Tibet, women were not allowed to enter the Mahākāla room in the monasteries. The nun Yeshe Palmo stated that women are allowed to enter the Mahākāla room in H.H. Karmapa's monastery in Rumtek, Sikkim, and this seems to be the practice in many of the monasteries established in exile.



### The Chanting-master

The chanting-master or *umtse* leads the recitation in the temple of the nunnery. The nun serving as *umtse* must be one who knows all the texts properly. As she is leading the recitation, she must be very careful not to make any mistakes. She plays the cymbals during the ritual, and the other nuns playing instruments look to her for a sign of when to start. In Tilokpur one of the young nuns serves as chanting-master, and this duty rotates like the other ones in the nunnery.

There is a retired chanting-master in Tilokpur, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo. She was asked to be the chanting-master by H.H. Karmapa when the nunnery was first established in Dalhousie. She served in this duty for about twelve years, and she is the one in Tilokpur who knows the texts and how to perform the chanting the best. When she is present during the ritual recitations, she is seated above the young chanting-master, and if the latter makes any mistakes, she will correct her.

### The Playing of Ritual Instruments

There is also the task of playing ritual instruments during the ceremonial chanting, and nuns who are especially clever or have an interest in playing the instruments and are eager to practice, will get this task. It is not a fixed duty, and seems to vary throughout the year. The instruments used in Tilokpur are: two short trumpets (*kangling*), a large drum (*ngachen*) which is placed by the entrance of the temple on the left side, and two kinds of cymbals, small and large (*silnyen* and *rolmo*). The nunnery also owns two larger trumpets or oboes (*gyaling*), but these are seldom used. Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim said that the nuns would have liked to have the very long trumpets (*dungchen*) used by the monks, but they cannot afford to buy them.

For many years the nuns have wanted to start recitation of the *Chö* ritual,<sup>12</sup> and they have bought the small drums (*damaru*) necessary for this ritual. It will be quite time-consuming, however, to start this recitation, as only the old chanting-master, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo, knows how to perform the prayer properly. Also, my informant maintained that the drums owned by the nunnery are of very poor quality and need to be replaced.

In Tilokpur there is a system of rotation, according to which

duties change at every Tibetan New Year, so that an egalitarian structure is preserved. Each nun will serve in the different posts for two or three years, and the more experienced one will teach the new one how to perform the duty. In this way all the nuns learn how to serve in the different posts of the nunnery. For certain demanding posts, such as that of chanting-master and that of disciplinarian, only nuns suited for these tasks will be chosen, and they may serve in the duty for a number of years. In Tilokpur, the four head nuns will decide who is going to have the duties for the next period. The duties mentioned above are the ones that are common to most monasteries and nunneries in Tibet and in exile, although in monasteries the organizational structure is more complex than in nunneries.<sup>13</sup>

### The Four Head Nuns

When Freda Bedi became sick, she handed over the responsibility of the nunnery to four of the most able nuns. They were Karma Hoser, Yeshe Palmo, Tsultrim Sangmo, and Pema Tsultrim. These four nuns would take on the main responsibility for running the nunnery. They would take turns doing the duty of the disciplinarian, of handling the finances, and of being the secretary. The head nuns delegate work to the other nuns. If there are urgent duties that have to be carried out, the head nuns may be absent from the daily recitation in the shrine-room.

The four nuns appointed by Kechog Palmo served as leaders until *Losar* 1984. Because of bad health and extended travel for some of them, they decided to hand over the responsibility to other nuns. A couple of the nuns who had served in leader duties until 1984 were quite overworked and felt strained by their responsibilities. Apart from the abbess, new leaders were appointed: Thegchog Sangmo, Wangchuk Palmo, Karma Dechen, and Tenzin Dzompa.

### The Abbess

Freda Bedi wanted Karma Hoser to be the abbess, and this seems to be an innovation inspired by this British nun. To my knowledge, the Abbess of Samding, Dorje Phagmo, is the only abbess mentioned by Tibetan sources. None of the Tibetans that I interviewed, whether monastics or lay people, had ever heard of a fe-

male *khenpo*,<sup>14</sup> with the exception of Dorje Phagmo. In a letter to Muriel L. Lewis, Freda Bedi refers to Karma Hoser as the *Ani Khenpo*. The Tibetan nuns, however, address their abbess with the term *ani*. Yeshe Palmo mentioned:

When people in Dharamsala ask who is our abbot, and we answer that we have an abbess, they think this is very strange.

The duties of the abbess involve taking all the major decisions in the nunnery. At the time I was staying in Tilokpur, the abbess was on a pilgrimage to Tibet and Nepal and afterwards she started a three-year retreat at Sherab Ling. In her absence, the disciplinarian, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, became the leader of the nunnery. When Pema Tsultrim left for Hong Kong to serve as a translator, Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo became the caretaker of the nunnery, and she has served in this duty for three years.

### Other Duties

In an exile nunnery in India, there are a few duties that did not exist in Tibet. Since the nuns in Tilokpur have contact with several western friendship groups and western sponsors, one nun is responsible for carrying out correspondence in English. The nun in Tilokpur who is most skilful in Tibetan grammar takes care of the correspondence with Tibetan institutions. Also, nuns from Tilokpur are employed by the owners of Oberoi Hotel in New Delhi, as a servant for Mrs. Oberoi. A Buddhist nun was wanted as a maid, as she could be trusted. This arrangement was made by Mrs. Bedi, as the Oberois were friends of hers. The nuns take turns serving in this duty, and at present Situ Rinpoche decides who is to be sent to New Delhi. Some of the nuns say that it is quite lonely for them staying at the Oberoi Hotel, and one nun said that she thought it quite unsuitable for nuns to do that kind of work.

#### 5.4.2. *Hierarchy*

Within the nunnery there is a status system that all the nuns know and adjust to. The four head nuns enjoy much prestige and have the privilege of making the decisions in the nunnery. Among the head nuns the positions of abbess and disciplinarian are the most

highly thought of. Among the other offices, that of chanting-master carries much prestige.

During prayers in the shrine-room, the nuns are seated according to their status, as is the custom also among lay Tibetans. There are three rows of seats in the temple. At the head of one row is a vacant seat for visiting lamas. Then follows the seat of the abbess, who has a table that is lower than the lama's, but higher than the table of the disciplinarian, who follows next. Below, the other nuns are seated. At the head of the opposite row, is the vacant throne for visiting high lamas, such as H.H. the Dalai Lama, H.H. Karmapa and H.E. Situ Rinpoche. The nuns adjust the height of this throne with pillows, according to the rank of the lama. During such a visit, the throne is placed up in front of the temple. Then follows the seat of the old chanting-master, whose table is as high as that of the abbess. Below the old chanting-master is the seat of the young chanting-master who has a slightly lower table. Then follow the seats of the older nuns. In a third row, and down by the door, the younger nuns sit. If there are nuns who have broken some of the main disciplinary rules or the main vows, they will be seated below the others. Except for the nuns serving in the main duties, there are no definite rules as to who is to sit where. The nuns not serving in any duty are generally seated according to how long they have stayed in the nunnery. Among themselves, the nuns know who is more highly considered and they find their seat according to this status system.

In Geden Choeling in Dharamsala the nuns are also seated according to their status. I was present during a ritual performed here: the retired chanting-master, Ngawang Choezin, was seated on the highest seat by the door, and the present chanting-master (in her twenties) had a higher seat than the other nuns. Except for the retired and the present chanting-master, the other nuns did not have tables.<sup>15</sup>

#### 5.4.3. *Flexibility*

While I was doing fieldwork in Tilokpur, there were thirty-three nuns in the nunnery, and it was overcrowded. Partly in order to cope with problems of space, about one half of the nuns were alternately sent on pilgrimage or to attend religious teachings. When I came to Tilokpur in January 1984, there were only about

fifteen nuns in the nunnery. The rest had gone to Bodh Gaya to attend the religious teachings of H.H. the Dalai Lama, and they were back in the nunnery by the middle of February. Later, when he was giving religious instructions in Dharamsala in March, the other half of the nuns went there.

If a nun wants to go on pilgrimage or to go home to visit her relatives, she is usually granted a leave. One of the elder nuns, Ogyen, who had stayed in a Nyingmapa nunnery in Tibet, spends most of the year in Dharamsala. Two nuns have for some years been staying at Sherab Ling as they have both been quite sick, the climate there being favorable to their health. One of these nuns, Yeshe Palmo, is presently in Sweden receiving medical treatment, and assisting as translator at a Tibetan Buddhist Centre. Sometimes nuns are given advice by high lamas to undertake special religious practices or to serve specific people, and in such cases the nuns can leave the nunnery. Thus the former head nun Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim was sent to Hong Kong to serve as a translator.

H.E. Situ Rinpoche has given the Tilokpur nuns land for building a retreat site at Sherab Ling. The nuns have taken turns building the retreat, under supervision of the head of the retreat, the nun Pema Sangmo. In 1984 Changchub Samten Ling was finished. In November 1984 eight nuns started the three-year retreat, among them the abbess and all the elder nuns from Tilokpur. Several of the younger nuns stated that they would very much like to do the three-year retreat, but they decided to let the older ones go first, so that they would get this chance before they die.<sup>16</sup> Another group of seven nuns replaced the first group when the three years were up (early 1988). The nun Pema Sangmo has started extending the hermitage to make room for more nuns. Nuns from Tilokpur go to Sherab Ling to cook for the nuns in retreat. Apart from the fact that a hermitage in the mountains helps the nuns excel in yoga and meditation, it is also very practical for them to have two monastic institutions. By moving between the nunnery in Tilokpur and the retreat site at Sherab Ling, the nuns can avoid the very hot summers in the Kangra Valley and the cold winters in the mountains.

## 5.5. Daily Life in Tilokpur Nunnery

### Temple Service

The ritual recitation in the shrine-room takes place every day except Sunday, when the nuns have the day off. They start the chanting every day at 5:30 in the morning, and this session lasts until breakfast at 7 a.m. The morning recitation includes twelve different prayers, among which are a prayer to Guru Rinpoche, a Guru Yoga prayer, a prayer to the sixteen Arhats, a short Tārā prayer, an Avalokiteśvara prayer, a long life prayer to the different lamas, and a prayer for the general well-being of Tibetans.<sup>17</sup>



*Ritual recitation in the shrine-room. (Photo: Per Kvarne).*

Between 7 and 8 a.m., the nuns have breakfast, and the younger nuns fetch water from the village well. At 8 a.m., Tibetan tea is served in the shrine-room, and afterwards there is a new session of ritual recitation, which includes Guru Rinpoche prayers.<sup>18</sup> Then follow prayers to Tārā.<sup>19</sup> This session lasts until lunch, which is served at noon. At 2 p.m. the shrine-keeper circumambulates the shrine-room beating a drum, calling the nuns to continue the chanting. Sweet Indian tea is served, and Tārā recitation is continued until 4 p.m. when Tibetan tea is served. After tea the young nuns will again go to the well to fetch water, while the older nuns continue the chanting. Usually, they are all gathered again by 5:30 p.m. and now there is a prayer to the different Buddhas<sup>20</sup> only

interrupted by a special prayer to Amitābha.<sup>21</sup> At 6 p.m. there is a short Mahākāla prayer,<sup>22</sup> chanted both in the shrine-room and in the Mahākāla room. Several short prayers follow.<sup>23</sup> The ritual services are over by 6:30 p.m. and the nuns can take their evening meal.

On certain dates of the Tibetan month there are special prayers. On the eighth and twenty-eighth, the nuns do a Medicine Buddha recitation.<sup>24</sup> On the ninth and nineteenth the nuns do the middle Mahākāla prayer, on the tenth there is a Padmasambhava recitation,<sup>25</sup> and on the fifteenth there are prayers to different lamas: Milarepa, Gampopa, and Karma Pakshi, alternating each month. On the twenty-fifth of every Tibetan month the nuns do a prayer to Dorje Phagmo,<sup>26</sup> on the twenty-ninth they do the long Mahākāla prayer,<sup>27</sup> and finally on the thirtieth they do an Amitābha prayer.<sup>28</sup>

### Fasting Practices

The Tilokpur nuns practice confession and fasting (*sochung*) three times a month, on the eighth, the fifteenth, and the thirtieth. The same practice of fasting and confession was done in Chedo Nunnery in Tibet, and is generally done in all Tibetan monasteries and nunneries. *Sochung* includes confessing and repenting one's bad actions. In the morning the nuns only drink tea, then they have a regular lunch, and until the next morning they can only drink tea, without milk. The late nun Changchub Chodon said about the *sochung*:

When practicing fasting, we get up at 4:30 in the morning, and before it gets light, we take eight vows, against killing, stealing, lying etc. In the night we dedicate the merit. This is a twenty-four-hour vow.

*Nyungne* is a more comprehensive fasting practice that gives more merit, and the nuns in Tilokpur do this three times a year. Then they do two or three periods of fasting that last for six days.

In the nunnery in Dharamsala the nuns go for confession, *sochung*, twice a month (in the middle and at the end of each month) to the temple of H.H. the Dalai Lama, the Tsuklakhang. I was visiting the Dharamsala Nunnery while they were preparing for the most comprehensive fasting practice, the *nyungne*. It was started on the twenty-ninth of June. *Nyungne* sessions were

started simultaneously in a special fasting temple, the Nyungne Lhakhang in Macleod Ganj, Upper Dharamsala. This fasting practice went on for sixteen days, alternating with eight days of eating and eight days with no food. When the nuns are not eating, they are not supposed to speak.

Several of my informants maintain that nuns and women do more fasting practice than men. K. March observed that during a *nyungne* ritual in the Solu monastery of Chiwong, women outnumbered men by seven to one.<sup>29</sup> In the biography of the nun Yeshe Drolma we learn that she has done extensive fasting practice.<sup>30</sup> My informants could not explain why nuns and women do more fasting than men. One reason might be that the practice was started by an Indian *bhikṣuṇī*, Gelongma Palmo. Several of my nun informants had heard of Gelongma Palmo. Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim told me the following:

Gelongma Palmo was an Indian princess. She had leprosy and started the *nyungne* practice to Chenresig. She died in a cave. She reached Enlightenment and there was a sweet scent from her bodily refuse. Her brother was not very interested in religion when he was young. Later he started practicing religion and he reached Enlightenment before his sister.<sup>31</sup>

### Leisure Time

On days off, only the Mahākāla prayer is performed at sunset. On Sundays, this prayer finishes one hour earlier than on other days. Once in awhile, the disciplinarian will tell the younger nuns to clean the courtyard and the toilets of the nunnery, and then only the older nuns will perform the chanting in the shrine-room.

When the nuns have a day off, they spend the time doing their laundry, or they go to the nearest village to do their shopping, they take a bath in the river down by the road, or they go for visits in the village. The younger nuns will play like other young children do, and during this time there is a very joyful atmosphere in the nunnery.

Some of the diligent nuns will perform recitation and some will practice on the musical instruments. On days off, and during daily lunch-breaks, the older nuns may be seen reciting religious texts. Even during vacation time, two of the oldest nuns, the late Changchub and the late Gacho, were often sitting outside their



rooms reciting religious texts. These nuns could also frequently be seen circumambulating the temple, while the younger nuns seldom would do this.

A couple of times a year the nuns go for a picnic. Most of the younger nuns will come, while the older ones do the chanting in the shrine-room. During my time in Tilokpur, we went for a picnic to Kangra where there is a temple to a Hindu goddess that the nuns wanted to visit.<sup>32</sup>

## 5.6. Education of the Nuns in Tilokpur

### Education of Nuns Ordained in Tibet

In Tibet, educated women outside the aristocracy were mostly nuns. They learnt how to read and write and were given instruction in how to perform rituals, in meditation and sometimes in philosophy and logic. Of the eight nuns in Tilokpur who had been nuns in Tibet, most had entered nunneries at a young age and received their training there. The late nun Changchub Chodon maintained that the religious practice in Chedo Nunnery, where three of the Tilokpur nuns had stayed, was very much like it is in Tilokpur today. The rituals were, on the whole, the same, and the nuns did the preliminary practices, the *ngöndro*.<sup>33</sup> On completing this practice, the nuns generally started a three-year retreat. The Tilokpur nuns who undertook ordination in Tibet have all finished the preliminary practices, while only one of them had completed the three-year retreat in Tibet.

### Education of the Younger Generation Nuns

Most of the younger generation nuns who have been brought up in India, have had a chance to go to school. Numerous Tibetan schools have been established in exile. Of the younger nuns, there are only five who have not been to school at all. Two of these come from Tawang, one comes from Darjeeling, one from a settlement in southern India, and one comes from Dalhousie.

Five of the nuns have attended the Central Tibetan School in Dalhousie, and one of these, Yeshe Palmo, was sent to Nainital by Sister Kechog Palmo and Lama Karma Thinley to study in an English medium school. Four nuns come from the Tibetan settlements in Mungod in Karnataka, southern India, and they have all

been to school. One of the nuns comes from Mussorie and has attended the Central Tibetan school there, two nuns come from the Central Tibetan school in Simla, one studied in the Tibetan school in Patlikhul, and one attended the Tibetan school at the Children's Village in Dharamsala. One of the nuns has attended a Tibetan school in Nepal.

Among the nuns in Tilokpur who do not belong to refugee families, the Kinnauri nun has attended school up to the fifth grade. The two Bhutanese sisters attended school in Bhutan up to the third and fourth grade. Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim attended an English medium school in Darjeeling up to the tenth grade, while the two nuns from Tawang had not had the chance to go to school.

The nun Yeshe Palmo, who attended the English medium school in Nainital, first passed the fourth grade in the Tibetan school in Dalhousie, and then completed the eighth grade in the English medium school. The abbess, Karma Hoser, was sent by Freda Bedi to the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies at Sarnath, and she must be one of the very few Tibetan nuns to have obtained a B.A. degree.

Of the nuns in Tilokpur who have been to school, one quit after the third grade, four completed the fourth grade, four passed the fifth grade, three the sixth, three the seventh, three passed the eighth grade, and one passed the tenth grade. Only one of the nuns, Bhikshuni Wangchuk Palmo, passed the higher secondary school.

### Religious Instruction

Of the nuns who were ordained in India, only one had completed the preliminary practices (by March 1984), and she is among the most educated nuns. Among the others, there are two nuns who have completed 100,000 prostrations and the 100,000 *mantras* of Vajrasattva, and nine nuns have completed 100,000 prostrations.

Most of the nuns in Tilokpur are thus only at the beginning of their clerical education. When the abbot Lama Karma Thinley was staying in the nunnery, he gave the nuns instructions in how to do the preliminary practices, and he was available for those nuns who needed special instructions on other religious practices. Lama Karma Thinley stated:

I gave the nuns instructions as to how to do the ritual recitations, the preliminary practices, and I gave special instructions. Furthermore, they were taught to do embroideries of the eight auspicious signs and the like. While they were in Dalhousie, the nuns made an appliqué of a two-story Buddha, which they offered to H.H. the Dalai Lama, and he gave it to Sera Monastery in southern India. The nuns also made a two-story Amítābha by the same technique, but this was later destroyed when the nunnery burnt down, after it had been moved to Tilokpur.

During the time in Dalhousie, I invited several learned lamas to visit the nunnery. Especially, the nuns were visited by Taglung Matrul Rinpoche and Karlu Rinpoche. Together with the young lamas, the nuns were taught from the *Shangpa Kagyu* texts by Karlu Rinpoche. In the early seventies I was asked by H.H. Karmapa to go to Canada, and instead of me, Khenpo Kathar was sent to the nunnery. He stayed there for one year and was replaced by Trangu Rinpoche. The latter now has a monastery in Nepal. Taglung Matrul Rinpoche visited the nunnery quite often while he stayed in Dalhousie, and he gave many religious teachings to the nuns. He spent the last days of his life in Tilokpur. Recently, Drupon Tendzin Phuntsog has come from Rumtek to visit and teach the nuns.

Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim stated that other important religious teachings that the nuns have received are instructions on how to do *phoba* meditation.<sup>34</sup> This instruction was given by Ayang Rinpoche, who stayed at the nunnery for two months in 1973. In 1982, the nuns received teachings on Gampopa's treatise *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*<sup>35</sup> from Khenpo Kedrup from Situ Rinpoche's monastery.

In 1984, there was no organized religious teaching going on in Tilokpur. Except for the abbess, Karma Hoser, none of the nuns had undertaken higher religious studies, and thus they had to depend on people outside to teach them or travel to see religious teachers. There are very few learned nuns available, and the nuns therefore have to look to the lamas and the monks for religious instruction.

The abbess, Karma Hoser, was taken out of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies by Freda Bedi when she had completed her B.A. degree, so that she could teach the nuns in Tilokpur. For a while there was organized instruction in Tibetan reading and writing, but this was stopped because there were so many requests for prayers that people wanted the nuns to perform. As the nuns are economically dependent on this form of ritual service, they had to sacrifice the education of the younger nuns.



*The late nun Gacho, reciting religious texts outside her room.*

When new nuns come to the nunnery, they sometimes make friends with or are taken care of by older nuns, and the elder will teach the young. This was the case with Yeshe Palmo, who was taken care of by an older and experienced nun, Tsultrim Sangmo. Likewise, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim is the student of the abbess Karma Hoser, and Dawa Drolma is the pupil of the old chanting-master, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo. When requested to do so, the older or the educated nuns will pass on their knowledge to the younger ones. Today, however, there does not seem to be much extra time for this. Some years ago a new room was attached to the nunnery and the nuns planned to use it as a school-room. Today, however, the room is used as a guest-room. Six Tilokpur nuns have recently finished the three-year retreat, and seven nuns are currently doing this retreat (1989).<sup>36</sup>

Before they are allowed to take part in the recitation, all newcomers to the nunnery have to learn how to recite the ritual texts that are chanted in the shrine-room. Thus, the twelve year old (1984) Kunsang Drolma, could be seen every day outside her

room practicing recitation while the others were doing the communal chanting. It took her about six months to learn all the texts before she was allowed to take part in the recitation in the temple.

As there are hardly any teaching institutions open to nuns, it is very hard for them to get educated. Because of the rule of celibacy there is a problem of housing monks and nuns together, and a way to avoid the problem is to keep the sexes apart. This is very unfortunate for the nuns, since only the monasteries have had resources to establish teaching centres.

As for the Gelugpa nuns, the nunnery in Dharamsala, Geden Choeling, has an abbot, but he does not live in the nunnery and generally does not give the nuns religious teachings, limiting himself to giving advice on how to perform recitations. For some years the nuns in Dharamsala Nunnery have been taught some debating, and lately a monk-student from the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala has given the Tilokpur nuns some instruction in dialectics. On the whole, however, the nuns in Dharamsala were doing the same kind of religious practice as the nuns in Tilokpur, which mainly consisted of performing rituals and practicing meditation.<sup>37</sup>

An alternative way of receiving religious instruction for nuns in the Dharamsala area is to attend the lectures at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. The Dalai Lama has started this series of lectures for westerners interested in Buddhism. The lectures are held by Geshe Ngawang Dargye, and are translated into English. When I was staying in Dharamsala, a few Tibetan Gelugpa nuns sometimes attended the lectures, but there were no nuns from Tilokpur. Tilokpur is only one and a half hours away by bus, so it should not be too difficult for nuns from Tilokpur to come here. They would, however, need extra money for food and a place to stay overnight, and this might be the reason why they do not use this opportunity. Other factors that may explain their absence is that the religious teachings given here are oriented to the Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism, and the audience mainly consists of westerners.

The only way for the Tilokpur nuns to obtain religious instruction is thus by self-study and by inviting lamas to teach at the nunnery. Alternatively they themselves can go to see the lamas. There is, however, the question of expenses. In the Tibetan tradition the custom is to provide good food and to pay for all the ex-

penses of the lama who is giving religious teachings. Since the Tilokpur nuns are poor, they cannot invite lamas very often. One western nun told me that on two occasions she had offered money to nuns so that they could invite teachers to instruct them. Both times the nuns have expressed doubts that the money would be sufficient for this purpose.

While I stayed in Tilokpur, the former abbot, Lama Karma Thinley, came from Canada to visit. He came to Tilokpur twice, and stayed there during the Tibetan New Year celebration, and again during the last few days of his stay in India. When I was present he gave the nuns an oral transmission of the texts that they are reciting in their daily ritual service. The lama recited the texts very fast, but would pause to explain certain important points. The idea is that the lama transfers his own understanding of the text to the nuns. Before a person can start studying a text, an oral transmission and an initiation to the text is needed to get the right understanding. One nun said that although they attend religious teachings by lamas, they do not always understand what is being said. Another nun confirmed this, and both informants maintained that nuns often were afraid of asking questions.

Another question is whether it is attractive for monks or lamas to come to Tilokpur to teach. Some monks I talked with felt that the reason why lamas so seldom go to the nunneries is because they are afraid of breaking their vows. Another factor is that nunneries are unimportant religious institutions and teaching there does not give much prestige. Although three lamas came to visit during my stay, they did not stay in Tilokpur for long. The chief teacher of the Tilokpur nuns, H.E. Situ Rinpoche, came once, and he stayed for one and a half hours. The nuns had been preparing for his visit for weeks. They were hoping that he would stay for a few days. The nuns had almost given up all hope when he finally came, and there was hardly time to eat the delicious food that they had prepared. A western nun told me that once when H.H. Karmapa visited Tilokpur, he stayed for half an hour. Afterwards he spent several days at the Drugpa Kagyu monastery in Tashi Jong. My informant thought this was strange, since the nunnery in Tilokpur was presided over by H.H. Karmapa. In 1981 the Tilokpur nunnery was visited by H.H. the Dalai Lama.

There are areas of religious practice that are closed to nuns. I asked the nuns in Tilokpur whether they perform ritual dances,

and they answered that they would very much like to, but they had not received any instructions as to how to perform the dances and they had not heard of any nuns doing them. This seems to be an area restricted to the monks, and even though there may not be formal rules prohibiting nuns from performing such dances, one nun said: "The monks would laugh at us if we started doing them."

## 5.7. The Economy

### Individual Economy

As was usual in Tibet, each nun has her own economy. The family of the nun will continue to support her while she stays in the nunnery. The majority of the nuns are quite poor, as their families are refugees. About half of them are orphans or come from families with only one parent. As stated earlier, Freda Bedi established friendship groups in the West, and she was able to find individual sponsors for several nuns. Some of the western sponsors continued their support as long as the nuns were in school, but afterwards some nuns had to find other sources of income. How much money the western sponsor will send a nun also varies. Some of them are very punctual and send the same amount of money every month, while others send money once in awhile. Generally, the sponsors send between 100–150 Rs. a month. In March 1984, there were eight poor nuns in Tilokpur who did not have sponsors. These nuns were among the latest admitted members of the nunnery.

From their own money the nuns have to buy robes, shoes, medicine, religious texts, writing material, bus tickets, soap, and other items for personal use. If they want food in addition to what they receive from the nunnery, they have to pay for this. Extra food that the nuns sometimes buy is milk, eggs, and fruit.

For several years, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim has kept record of the money that was given to each individual nun from sponsors. An Australian couple who belong to an Australian friendship group and who have spent a lot of time in Tilokpur have tried to make the nuns pool their resources and share their money. This, however, has not been carried through. The poorest nuns who do not receive money from their family or sponsor, are given forty Rs. a month from the funds of the nunnery. In addition, the nuns

who are better off give about three percent of their monthly income to the nunnery on behalf of the poorest nuns. This is to cover the monthly expenditure the nunnery has for these nuns, such as stamps, stationery or joint ventures that all the nuns take part in. The nuns have discussed whether to raise their contribution to five percent.

### The Economy of the Nunnery

The economy of the nunnery itself is a different matter. The nunnery receives help from an Australian friendship group and from an American friendship group in Ojai, California. These contacts were established by Freda Bedi. From Ojai, the nuns have received packages of medicine, but often the parcels have been opened and some of the medicine has been stolen. The nuns have also received help from Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Centre in Woodstock, USA. In April 1984 representatives from the Australian friendship group came to visit the nuns in Tilokpur and to see that the sponsorship money was distributed correctly.

From Catholic Relief Service, USA, the nuns have received food. Up to 1981 they received rations of milk, one kilo milk powder per nun per month, and half a kilo per month for a child nun. The milk rations had been given from before my informant, Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, came to Tilokpur in 1973. Up till 1982 the nuns received bulgar wheat, corn, and sometimes oil from the same source. Up to 1977 the Tilokpur nuns received second-hand clothing.

The Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs of H.H. the Dalai Lama sometimes requests the nuns to perform prayers for the general well-being of the Tibetans, and the nuns receive payment for these prayers.<sup>38</sup> The office also administers the help that comes from Catholic Relief Service in the USA, and help that is given by the Indian Government. The help from the Indian Government amounts to 150 Rs. for each nun every year. The nuns have applied for Indian ration cards, so that they can buy certain foods cheaper at a depot in the village. Occasionally, the nuns in Tilokpur have received medicine from the Delek Hospital in Dharamsala, and the nuns are given small payments for gathering special herbs used in Tibetan medicine. From 1979 an Australian woman has regularly been sponsoring fruit and meat to supple-



ment the diet in Tilokpur. In a Buddhist Centre in New York members are collecting money so that the nuns can invite a lama to teach them.

The nuns in Tilokpur are well known for their recitation of Tārā prayers, as they are very conscientious. Even if the nuns run out of money, they do the whole 100,000 recitation to the end. One such recitation will take the nuns approximately three months to complete, and costs between 3000 to 4000 Rs. Tibetan lay people or clerics sometimes come to Tilokpur to request prayers, and often they want the nuns to perform the 100,000 Tārā prayer. When I was in Tilokpur, a Tibetan laywoman and monk came and asked them to perform Tārā and Avalokiteśvara prayers. They were sent by the Nyingmapa Kagye Silnon Lhakang in Dharamsala. When disciples of Kagyupa lamas need to have prayers read for them, the lamas sometimes recommend the Tilokpur nuns. Western Buddhists also request such prayers.

The nuns have not received money regularly from Rumtek Monastery, to which they are affiliated. Neither do the Tilokpur nuns receive any substantial economic support from Situ Rinpoche, their present chief lama. However, Situ Rinpoche wants to build a new nunnery at Tilokpur and he has started a fund-raising project for this purpose.

Another source of income is when visitors give offerings of tea and butter lamps. A tea offering costs forty-five Rs. plus ten Rs. for nine offering scarfs which are to be offered to the statues, the religious texts, the throne of the high lamas, the abbess, the old and the young chanting-masters, the disciplinarian, and the *nyerpas*. In addition, there is the custom of offering a small sum of money to each nun, and sometimes the nuns serving in special duties will receive twice the sum. The donor can then request that a special prayer is recited. While I was in Tilokpur two such offerings were given, one by a Tibetan layman and one by a Tilokpur nun. One of the head nuns maintained that nowadays the offering of butter lamps does not give the nunnery any profit, since the price of butter has been raised, and the nuns are reluctant to increase the price.

The nunnery also receives some money for renting out their guest-house. The guest-house is situated just below the nunnery, but outside its gates. Only two of the four rooms are fit to be rented out. In February 1984 one of the rooms was rented out to

an Indian physician who was working in Kotla, a village nearby, one room was occupied by myself, and the cook occupied the kitchen. The money for the rent of the rooms is generally used for the upkeep of the building.

Pilgrims visiting the Tilopa cave and the nunnery usually leave a donation at the main altar in the shrine-room. The nunnery is visited almost daily by local Indians who usually leave a few coins by the altar. These donations are spent by the shrine-keeper for the upkeep of the ritual objects and for buying offerings for the daily prayers. As the nunnery in Tilokpur is situated about one and a half hours away from the nearest Tibetan lay community, visits by lay people are infrequent. The nunnery accordingly does not receive much economic support in the form of donations.

The money given for Tārā prayers and tea offerings goes to the kitchen and are used for buying food and firewood. Thus this income is shared by all the nuns. In 1983 the nuns received about four times as much money for their Tārā prayers as they received in tea and butter lamp offerings. These payments are used for feeding the nuns throughout the year and thus the Tārā prayers constitute the main income for the nunnery itself.

Besides providing food for the nuns, funds must be found for the upkeep of the nunnery. If possible the nuns will whitewash the nunnery every New Year. The rooms of the nuns have likewise to be whitewashed. Because of termites, the wooden window-frames and the doors have to be replaced quite often. They also have to pay a small amount of money every year for land rent and they have to pay for the telephone that was installed in 1983.

Over the years the nuns have tried alternative ways of earning money to become self-supporting. They have been knitting and sewing garments for sale. They were given a sewing machine by a Tibetan friendship group. Today, however, this machine is used for stitching robes and blouses, covers for the statues and prayer-flags. For a while, the nuns ran a small teashop, and they have published a religious text. They have tried growing vegetables, but the soil is not suitable. The two buffaloes once owned by the nunnery, provided the nuns with milk; however, herding the buffaloes was very difficult as they would break into fields. Today the nuns state that their main occupation is religious practice. They perform prayers requested by lay people, and they are given donations in return. As a 100,000 Tārā prayer is completed faster if all

the nuns participate, they cannot afford to have some nuns engaged in other work.

### 5.8. Interaction with the Lay Community

Since Karma Drubgyu Targye Ling is established in an Indian village about one and a half hours by bus from the nearest Tibetan lay community, the interaction between the Tibetan community and the nuns does not take place daily. During the first three months of 1984, about twenty Tibetans visited Tilokpur. One fourth of them were relatives of nuns, three lamas visited the nunnery at the Tibetan New Year, Situ Rinpoche paid a brief visit at the end of March 1984, and a few monks came to visit. In the same period eleven or twelve foreigners visited Tilokpur. Two of these were nuns in the Tibetan tradition, a few were representatives from an Australian friendship group and the rest were western lay Buddhists.

Local Indians come to the nunnery almost daily to visit the shrine or to borrow the telephone. They often leave some coins at the altar. The village people and the nuns show mutual respect for each other's religion. The local cook, for instance, was very eager to get the blessing of Situ Rinpoche when he visited the nunnery, and the nuns on one occasion went on pilgrimage to the temple of a Hindu goddess in Kangra.

The nuns say that when the nunnery was established, the local Indians were quite suspicious. As they got used to the nuns, however, they became friendly, and today several of the nuns have good friends among the village girls. The Sikkimese nun Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim established very close ties with a Brahmin family in the village. In 1973, when she came to Tilokpur and did not know how to speak Tibetan, she used to visit this family often. They became very fond of her, and built an extension to their house so that she could stay there, but she was not permitted to move to the village. Pema Tsultrim has kept up contact with this family, she calls the wife in the family "mother," and every Sunday she is invited there for dinner. Other nuns are also invited for meals in the village, but not on such a regular basis.

When there is a wedding in Tilokpur the nuns are invited. Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim said this was because the Indians consider the nuns as holy and that it would be auspicious if they are in-

vited. I was present at one wedding together with the nuns. The nuns were seated on the porch opposite the more well-to-do women in the village, which means that they are held in high regard. My informant also stated that the local Indians think that the nuns are quite rich, since quite a few foreigners come to visit the nunnery, and since they have left some western goods that are highly valued in India.

The nuns have also some economic interaction with the village. They employ the Indian tailor, and they buy eggs and milk from the villagers. Sometimes they buy fruit and vegetables from the stalls owned by local people. More often, however, they will go to Kotla or Dharamsala to buy groceries, as the choice and quality of the goods are better there. A few of the men in the village have helped building the nunnery, and when heavy loads are to be brought to the nunnery, nuns employ a local porter. Furthermore, the present cook comes from the village.

## 5.9. Summary

The exile situation has brought along with it some changes for nuns as compared to their traditional way of life in Tibet. The initial idea of admitting nuns from all schools of Tibetan Buddhism to one nunnery, was not practiced in Tibet. In spite of the idea of a nunnery admitting nuns belonging to different schools, the majority of the nuns in Tilokpur belong to the Karma Kagyu School.

While nunneries in Tibet seem mainly to have recruited nuns from middle-income and rich families, most of the Tilokpur nuns come from poor families. While it was customary in Tibet that the nuns' families provided them with houses within the precinct of the nunnery, in exile housing is provided by the nunnery. To a larger extent than was the case in Tibet, the exile nunneries have become refuges for the poor, although my nun informants maintain that they think that only a few of the present nuns stay on in the nunnery in order to receive material support. In Tilokpur most of the nuns have western sponsors.

As for the internal organization of the nunnery, the office of the abbess, the appointment of four head nuns, and a few other duties are innovations made in exile. Apart from this the traditional organizational structure is maintained. This is also the case for the ritual recitations, which to a large extent are modelled on those

performed in Chedo Nunnery in Tibet. The general discipline for nuns in exile may be somewhat less strict than the case was in Tibet. The nun Ngawang Choezin claimed that the discipline at Nechungri in Lhasa was more strict than today in Geden Choeling Nunnery. The main reason for this, she held, is because the exile monastics have to adapt to Indian society.

As concerns education, most of the younger nuns have attended ordinary schools for some years, thus the level of education of young exile nuns is higher than it used to be in Tibet. Most of the nuns speak Hindi fluently, a couple of nuns know English very well, while a few others know a little English. The traditional rudimentary monastic education of nuns has been maintained in exile and in the past few years there are several changes that will serve to raise the religious education of Tibetan nuns.<sup>39</sup>

While in Tibet the nuns usually had extended contact with lay people, and regularly received donations from them, the nuns in Tilokpur do not have daily contact with other Tibetans and subsequently do not receive donations as they would in a traditional setting in Tibet. On the other hand, many of the exile nuns are supported from abroad.

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## Cultural Norms and Social Reality

On the basis of the early Buddhist literature, I.B. Horner states:

Indeed, in actual treatment and practice the almswomen were not so much honoured as the almsmen. By the adoption of the life and wearing of 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. (1975:289)

In this chapter I want to discuss how prevalent attitudes and norms in Tibetan culture relate to the actual situation of female religious specialists, particularly nuns. Such norms and attitudes are found in Buddhist literature. Monastics and lay people interpret these norms, and thus they are made relevant today. I propose to investigate the possibilities as well as limitations which this ideological structure constitutes for Tibetan nuns.

### 6.1. The Socio-cultural Position of Tibetan Nuns

Scholars writing about Tibetan culture often refer to Tibetan women as having high status, without specifying what the term status implies.<sup>1</sup> Describing woman as having high or low status often obscures the fact that her status may be low in some spheres of behavior, while in others, she may achieve equality with, or even surpass the status of men.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the status of an individual tends to change with age.

In anthropological studies on women in the last decades, much attention has been given to “the universal subordination of women.”<sup>3</sup> Recently, however, there has been a growing awareness that even though women are not in possession of formal

rights or authority, they may nonetheless have considerable informal power.<sup>4</sup> When considering the socio-cultural position of Tibetan female religious specialists, I will try to look at both formal and informal aspects of their status and role.

In assessing the socio-cultural position of women, Susan Rogers maintains that:

The primary problem is to explain and predict cross-cultural variations in the distribution of power between men and women.” (1978:154) “Power may be measured in terms of control over significant resources. ‘Resources’ is here broadly defined to include not only economic resources (e.g. land, labor, food, money), but also such resources as ritual knowledge, specialist skills, formal political rights, and information. (Ibid.:155)

When investigating the relative positions of religious specialists in Tibetan culture, it is important to look at differences in control over such significant resources. I consider significant resources in the Tibetan religious context to be: access to prestigious positions within the lay and ecclesiastic hierarchies, access to formal religious education, access to esoteric religious instruction transferred orally from teacher to disciple, access to ritual knowledge, and control over material means that enable the religious specialist to maintain his or her position. Even though there are numerous examples of poor individual monks and nuns in the history of Tibet, who obtained and practiced advanced religious teachings, the individual economy of monastics as well as the economy of monastic institutions no doubt set limits to how much time can be spent engaging in religious practices.

S. Rogers has proposed a model for the cross-cultural measuring of women’s status. She maintains that it is important first of all to establish the nature of sexual differentiation. This differentiation has two aspects, the behavioral and the ideological. By behavioral differentiation she refers to the fact that:

each sex acts out different roles, participates in different activities. (Ibid.:154)

By ideological differentiation S. Rogers means that:

males and females view themselves as fundamentally different from each other e.g. as separate entities or species. Where they are ideo-

logically differentiated, each sex may be expected to have its own perception of the universe, values, goals. (Ibid.:154)

She postulates that in cultures where ideological and behavioral differentiation exists we will find a balance of power, while where behavioral differentiation exists without ideological differentiation, a clear imbalance of power is produced, while in the third alternative there is neither behavioral nor ideological differentiation:

here, because both men and women are believed to have the right and ability to control the same resources, behavioral differentiation is removed so that they share this control. (1978:156)

S. Roger's conceptualization of the relative status of the sexes gives us a general framework for investigating the status of Tibetan nuns. Her scheme is meant to be applicable cross-culturally and is therefore very general; however, it provides a rough framework for considering and evaluating the relative position of Tibetan nuns and monks.

## 6.2. Behavioral Differentiation

### 6.2.1. *Formal Positions for Nuns in the Lay Administration*

From the time when Buddhism became firmly established in Tibet, an ecclesiastic hierarchy of monks was held to be superior to lay rulers.<sup>5</sup> The Order of nuns is hardly mentioned in the Tibetan literary tradition as playing any significant historical role, nor are nuns reported to have occupied any of the central positions as ministers, ambassadors, or mediators.

R.A. Stein reports that women often came to inherit chieftainships.<sup>6</sup> Above, we documented that a nun, too, could obtain the office of a local chieftain;<sup>7</sup> however, such occasions seem to have been rare, and only occurred if there were no able sons to inherit a throne.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, several nuns have achieved considerable informal power as freedom-fighters<sup>9</sup> and by working "behind the scenes." R.D. Taring maintains that Tibetan women did not work in government offices, although they often could influence their husbands; aristocratic wives were often the ones who administered the estates, and in ordinary households the women were consulted on all important matters.<sup>10</sup>



### 6.2.2. *Formal Positions for Nuns in the Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*

#### The Position of Nuns

The formal position of the religious specialist, that of monk and nun, was accessible to both men and women in early Buddhism. While the full ordination lineage for monks has been maintained in all Buddhist countries except Japan, the lineage of full ordination for nuns has been broken in the Theravāda tradition and apparently was not transmitted to Tibet.<sup>11</sup> In China, Taiwan, Korea, and some overseas Chinese communities, it is still possible for nuns to obtain full ordination. Even in countries like Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, where the lineage of full ordination for nuns has been broken, or in the case of Tibet where this lineage apparently never existed, women have continued to take extended lay vows and the vows of the novice and lived the life of celibate religious specialists. Some of these nuns observe the rigorous precepts of a fully ordained *bhikṣuṇī* without having actually taken them.

In the Tibetan tradition, the outward symbols of the role and position of monks and nuns, the shaved head and the maroon robe, are essentially the same. Although the way of dressing expresses equality, in certain spheres of behavior, e.g. when it comes to formal positions, there are different ranges of opportunity for monks and nuns.

#### Positions within Monastic Institutions

Monasteries and nunneries were generally established as independent institutions, each with its own organizational structure. As documented above, a nunnery was often a sub-branch of a monastery,<sup>12</sup> and monks often occupied the most important office in the nunnery, that of the abbot.<sup>13</sup> Nuns were appointed to positions within the nunnery such as disciplinarian or chanting-master. Age, social background, and personal ability determined who was elected to the different positions. Regarding the career opportunities for Sakya nuns in Tibet, R. Ekvall and C.W. Casinelli write:

The life of a nun had few attractions. Monks always served as abbots of the nunneries and hence only lesser positions were open to the nuns. No nuns were sent out of Sa sKya proper, and the most a nun could aspire to was becoming a personal servant of the royal family, usually of its unmarried daughters. (1969:297)

Likewise, C. von Fürer-Haimendorf reports of Sherpa nunneries:

The organization of nunneries is modelled on that of monasteries, but communal activities and services are fewer, and the discipline is, on the whole, less strict. There is no figure corresponding to a reincarnate lama or permanent abbot, but the head nun, known as loben, is elected from time to time. There are also nuns holding the posts of umse and gerku. (1972:150)

Positions as chanting-master and disciplinarian gave considerable prestige and authority within the nunnery. In lay society, too, these positions carry some prestige. A Tibetan laywoman in Dharamsala praised both the young and the old chanting-masters from Geden Choeling Nunnery, saying they were knowledgeable. Several informants mentioned that chanting-masters and disciplinarians in nunneries have power and learning. In Tilokpur Nunnery the old chanting-master, Bhikshuni Kunsang Wangmo, is venerated for her ritual knowledge, and the four head nuns are respected by the other nuns. The abbess is praised for her learning and intelligence. Older nuns have higher status than the younger, a fact reflected in the seating arrangements in the shrine-room.<sup>14</sup> The reputation of these nuns, however, is hardly known outside their nunnery.

### The Position of the Religious Teacher

The role of the lama is extremely important in Tibetan Buddhism. As Tantrism is an esoteric religion, initiation by a spiritual master is a necessary condition for spiritual progress. Many of the religious teachings are only transmitted orally. For this reason the term Lamaism is sometimes used interchangeably with Tibetan Buddhism. Compared to the imprint made by male teachers in Tibetan history, there have been few women who were famous for their religious teaching. R. Ray states:

it is also important to recognize that there were always far fewer women Tantric practitioners than men and that only occasionally were major teachers female. (1980:228)

In the biographies of celebrated nuns and *yoginīs*, we learn much about their arduous religious training, but we seldom hear that they receive religious teachings from fellow *yoginīs*. The most fa-

mous female teachers and lineage-holders are Machig Labdron and Yeshe Tsogyal. One of the incarnations of Dorje Phagmo was said to have been very learned,<sup>15</sup> and probably passed on religious instructions to the nuns and monks staying at Samding. In addition to the nuns in her nunnery, Lochen Rinpoche had many disciples from Lhasa, both ecclesiastics and lay people. Several of my informants had received religious teachings from Lochen Rinpoche. The nun Nene Choden Sangmo passed on initiations to the nun Yeshe Drolma, and Nene Choden's incarnation, Drigung Khandro, had several followers.<sup>16</sup> However, these examples are exceptions.

While it is possible to become a religious teacher through study and religious practice, there is also an ascribed position, that of the reincarnate lama or *tulku*. A *tulku* is an incarnation of a being who has reached the third level in the career of the Bodhisattva, the Path of Insight. This is the level where the Bodhisattva realizes the Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of all phenomena.<sup>17</sup> The *tulkus*, who are mostly men, automatically become religious teachers, although most of them go through years of religious training as well.

### Lineages of Female Incarnation

In the Kagyupa School, there are several branches, each with its own hierarchy of reincarnate lamas. The great masters are seen, on the one hand, as incarnations of Bodhisattvas, and on the other hand, as incarnations of their predecessors. In the Gelugpa and the Nyingmapa Schools also, succession is invested through lines of incarnation. In the Sakyapa School, ecclesiastic positions were inherited from uncle to nephew. D. Bärlocher states that within the Gelugpa tradition there are two main groups of *tulkus*:

The *tulkus* that are officially recognized by the Tibetan Government are: the already mentioned Hothogthus, and the Tshogchen *tulku*, – and *tulkus* that are only recognized by their monasteries, the so-called Datsang *tulku*. (1982:52, vol.1)

The only officially recognized female incarnation, that of Dorje Phagmo, has been reckoned as a *Hutuktu*.<sup>18</sup> Some informants maintained that the fact that Tibetan nuns cannot obtain the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination may be part of the reason why nuns have not had access to high ecclesiastic positions. It is significant that

the abbess of Samding, Dorje Phagmo, is reported to have worn the robe of a fully ordained monk.<sup>19</sup>

Even though there were a number of great *yoginīs* in Tibetan history, some of which were acknowledged as incarnations, an institutional structure for recognizing and maintaining lines of female incarnation never developed. In monasteries the *labrang* institution took care of such functions.<sup>20</sup> One reason for female incarnations not being recognized officially and for there being no institutional structure maintaining such incarnations, may be the fact that nuns or *yoginīs* never occupied any of the central positions in official lay or clerical structure.

While the position of male *tulku* is institutionalized, this is not the case for female incarnations. Regardless of their abilities, young boys are installed in high positions as abbots and hierarchs of important monasteries, but this is not the case of girls. The recognition of *tulkus* is a matter of ascribed status. When discussing the position of the *tulku*, H.H. the Dalai Lama stated:

Among the Tulku group there are (also) people who are really qualified and who are really respected, who have world-wide respect (as scholars). And at the same time there are Tulkus who, even though they may not have the qualifications, can take advantage of certain things because of their name (and title) of Tulku. (D. Bärlocher 1982: 122, vol.1)

There were some female incarnations who were recognized only regionally, or by certain traditions or monasteries. Lochen Rinpoche was regarded by her followers as an incarnation of Machig Labdron.<sup>21</sup> The present incarnation of Shugsep Jetsun Rinpoche has been recognized both by H.H. the Dalai Lama and H.H. the Karmapa. The present head of the nunnery Karma Chokor Dachen in Sikkim, Khandro Rinpoche, is recognized within the Karma Kagyu School as being an incarnation of Khandro Ogyen Tsomo, the consort of the Fifteenth Karmapa. In the Sakyapa School, the sister of Sakya Trizin, Jetsun Luding Chime, is recognized as an emanation of Vajrayoginī, and she is a lineage-holder of important religious teachings. There is also the incarnation of the nun Nene Choden Sangmo, who was known as Drigung Khandro. Then there are the Gongri Khandro incarnations, two of whom we know, Alakh Gongri Khandro and Gongri Khandroma Konchog Rindzin Drolma. In the Bonpo religion, Khacho

Wangmo is recognized as the incarnation of Dechen Wangmo.<sup>22</sup> As for the status of these exceptional women, they were very highly regarded in Tibetan society. Bhikshuni Tendzin Palmo told me that she had once seen Lama Karma Thinley, himself recognized as an incarnation, prostrate before Drigung Khandro.

There are also some cases of individual incarnations or emanations. One of the Tilokpur nuns is said by some to be the emanation of a *dākinī*. A young nun informant stated that an important lama told them never to hurt this nun's feelings, indicating that she is a *dākinī*. My informant maintained that on several occasions this nun has been referred to as a *dākinī*, but as nothing more has been said about the matter for several years, she does not want to voice an opinion as to whether this nun is a true *dākinī* or not. This same informant related that H.H. Karmapa had expressed that Bhikshuni Kechog Palmo (Freda Bedi) was an emanation of the White Tārā.

Female incarnations can occasionally be recognized when they are young, like Jetsun Pema and Khandro Rinpoche. It seems to have been the rule that the very few women who became eminent religious teachers and who were recognized as incarnations, were recognized as such only after having proved their abilities. After years of meditation, people would begin speculating that the woman in question was an incarnation of a famous spiritual leader of the past.

Tibetans believe that male spiritual masters can incarnate in female bodies. Regarding the famous nun Jetsun Khacho Palmo from Nechungri Nunnery in Lhasa, it is said:

Before her incarnation as a woman, Lama Jetsun-ma had been born many times as a man and had always lived as a monk. (TN, 1985:3)

When asked if great Bodhisattvas can emanate in many different forms, the present head of the Sakya School, Sakya Trizin stated:

Yes; many different persons, many different forms, even as a layman, even as a woman, even as an animal. (D. Bärlocher, 1982:130)

The above statements clearly reflect that a male incarnation is more highly regarded than that of a female, though Tibetans also maintain that in an ultimate sense there is no difference whether

the incarnation is male or female. One of my young nun informants stated:

Really, it does not matter which human body the great spiritual masters take, man or woman. However, there is a general feeling that because men have more respect in society, they take the bodies of men. In male bodies, they can do more to benefit sentient beings.

B.D. Miller feels that the reason why there is no more information about female incarnation lines is that western scholars have neglected this field. She states:

British authors, perhaps because they were familiar with reigning queens as well as kings, usually mention Dorje Phagmo and her exalted position. Many others have concentrated exclusively on male incarnation lines and male Sangha constituents. (1980:157)

Most western scholars working on non-western cultures have until recently concentrated on the male population. Tibetan studies are no exception. However, the fact that there is so little data on female incarnation lines is not only due to western bias. When asked about such incarnations, Tibetan informants, both male and female, monastics and lay people, could give little information, indicating that only a few of the famous female religious specialists were recognized as important incarnations.

### 6.2.3. *Education of Monks and Nuns*

Writing about the traditional education for Nyingmapa monks in Tibet, Lobsang Dargyay stresses that the Nyingmapa and Kagyupa Schools share an emphasis on religious practice as opposed to philosophical training. Nevertheless, in the particular monasteries described by him, the monks were given a broad religious education. In the two Nyingmapa monasteries, in addition to the preliminary practices, there was an organized program for further training. Besides the preliminary practices, the novices were given instruction in Buddhist philosophy and meditation. When the introductory courses were completed the monks were able to learn yogic control of the breath (*tsalung*),<sup>23</sup> a yogic exercise that focuses on the three psychosomatic nerve-channels. Monks or *yogins* were given instructions on how to do special ascetic exercises,

among them a Tantric meditation practice particular to the Nying-mapa School, the “Great Perfection” meditation.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to this yoga and meditation training, monks could choose to educate themselves in philosophy and logic. This training followed that of the Gelugpa School, including a study of the collected works of Tsongkhapa with commentaries. The monks in the philosophy college were taught five subjects: logic, *prajñāpāramitā*, *madhyamaka*, *abhidharma*, and *vinaya*. The philosophy college was open to all monks who were considered intelligent, diligent and properly behaved. They were supported financially by the college and by gifts from the laity. Monks who successfully completed the philosophy training could go on to the Tantric college to study for a further three years.<sup>25</sup>

The Gelugpa tradition put strong emphasis on scholarly learning, and in the three great monasteries, Ganden, Drepung, and Sera, the monks were able to study toward the goal of obtaining a *geshe* degree, a religious education that in the Gelupa School takes about twenty years.<sup>26</sup> After completing this degree, the doctor of philosophy could go on to the Upper or Lower Tantric colleges in order to concentrate on the *Vajrayāna* teachings. The three above-mentioned monasteries have been re-established in India, and the traditional education for Gelugpa monks is thus maintained in exile. In Dharamsala there is also the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics<sup>27</sup> where scholars may study toward the *geshe* degree. Western people, lay and ordained, have been admitted here, and the admission policy allows qualified candidates to enroll regardless of sex or race.<sup>28</sup> The *geshe* degree can also be obtained in other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and in the Bon religion.<sup>29</sup>

In the previous chapter, we pointed out that there was no organized education for the Tilokpur nuns, except for reading, writing, and instruction in ritual, recitation, etc. For some years there has been instruction in debating and logic at Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala, and recently the same subjects have been taught to the nuns in Tilokpur. In Tibet there were some nunneries where advanced philosophical instruction was given, for instance, the Gelugpa Dragkar Choga Teng Nunnery.<sup>30</sup> This nunnery, however, seems to have been an exception. Mainly, nuns were taught how to read and write; beyond that, they could study advanced subjects such as philosophy only on their own initiative.

#### 6.2.4. *Access to Economic Resources*

In Tibet, in addition to the housing and food provided within the monasteries which came from general lay donations, both monks and nuns were individually supported by their relatives. Well-to-do families provided nun relatives with a house within the precincts of the nunnery, sometimes with animals and land. The economy of individual monks and nuns did not differ much, except for the fact that it was easier for monks to earn an income by performing religious services for lay people. As for the economy of the nunneries, we have to rely on the scant information available about these institutions in Tibet. Nunneries in Tibet were sometimes supported by great landlords<sup>31</sup> and received funds from lay benefactors. The late nun Changchub Chodon mentioned that the lay people almost competed to give donations to Chedo Nunnery. Generally, however, it appears that nunneries were much poorer than the monasteries. One informant stated that Galo Nunnery, which was one of the most famous nunneries in Tibet, owned fifteen heads of cattle prior to 1959. This nunnery is reported to have had five hundred nuns. In contrast, P. Kværne writes that a wealthy family might offer as many as thirty yaks annually to the monks in the Bonpo Menri Monastery in Tibet. This monastery was divided into a complex of institutions and each of the four main sections had its own economic basis. Between one and two hundred monks lived in this monastery.<sup>32</sup>

There is little information as to whether nuns received funds for studies or retreats. In Chedo Nunnery the nuns had to support themselves during the three-year retreat, while the monks at Tshurphu were supported by the monastery. Likewise the head teacher in the "House of Philosophy" in the Bonpo Menri Monastery was responsible for maintaining his students during the annual retreat.<sup>33</sup> L. Dargyay explains how Nyingmapa monks in the philosophy college were supported:

By the monastic administration, the students were supported with a scholarship, which was distributed in food, twice a year. Every student was maintained per year with: c. forty kilos of butter, fifty-four kilos of grain, and a quarter of a mule-load of "tea-bricks." In addition came even a share of the gifts offered to the monastery by the laity. (1978: 111)

In exile, several of the re-established monasteries impress one



with their fine architecture and elaborate decorations. Examples are H.E. Situ Rinpoche's monastery Sherab Ling (Kangra), the Drugpa Kagyu monastery in Tashi Jong (Kangra), the Nyingmapa monastery in Bir (Kangra), H.H. Karmapa's monastery in Rumtek (Sikkim), and the Bonpo monastery in Dolanji. Several of these monasteries are the head monastery of the respective schools. Compared to these, the exile nunneries are very poor and unimpressive. The buildings are simple and there are no signs of the luxury that characterizes some of the monasteries. Neither the nunnery in Tilokpur nor the one in Dharamsala have sufficient economic resources nor space to admit more nuns.<sup>34</sup>

The Tilokpur Nunnery can hardly afford to invite lamas to give religious instruction or to perform important ceremonies. According to Tibetan tradition, when inviting a high lama, great care is taken in preparing good food, proper accommodation, etc. One of the former head nuns of Tilokpur stated that once they invited a high lama for a couple of days to perform an important ceremony, and spent about seven thousand rupees for this purpose. It takes the nuns approximately six months to earn this amount of money. For years the Tilokpur nuns have been collecting money to furnish their shrine-room with proper seating and all the necessary ritual objects. The outer walls of their temple remained unpainted until a few years ago. The nuns cannot afford to decorate the interior of the shrine-room with frescoes, whereas most monasteries have such paintings, executed in a beautiful and elaborate style.

An example of the difference between monasteries and nunneries concerning size, economics, and traditional decoration, may be seen in the case of Ridzong Monastery and the affiliated Culican Nunnery in Ladakh. The monastery is situated on a desolate mountain side, and it looks quite impressive. The monks have their small meditation houses, and the shrine-rooms are finely decorated. The affiliated nunnery is situated further down the valley, close to the fields owned by the monastery. The nunnery houses animals along with the seven or eight resident nuns. During my visit to the nunnery, most of the nuns ate, slept, and spent their free time in one communal room. The nuns work in the fields belonging to the monastery and tend the animals, and receive in return a share of the produce.<sup>35</sup>

When considering S. Roger's model of behavioral differentiation, we find that both women and men have the same chances



*A nun from Culican Nunnery in Ladakh. The fields cultivated by the nuns, are owned by Ridzong Monastery.*

of becoming religious specialists, nuns and monks, and except for the fact that Tibetan nuns cannot become fully ordained, their way of dress, the novice ordinations, the novice vows, and the internal monastic organization are more or less the same. However, monks monopolize formal lay and ecclesiastic positions, leaving nuns to make their presence felt through informal channels, most commonly as *yoginīs*, religious teachers, or in grass-root politics. As such, women were and still are very highly regarded among Tibetans.

Although the possibility for women to pursue lives as religious specialists has been maintained in the history of Buddhism, neither in the Theravāda nor in the Mahāyāna traditions have nuns achieved institutionalized positions as scholars and religious leaders. Some of the reasons for this must be sought in unequal access to valued resources and in structural arrangements and regulations that have prevented nuns from developing their capabilities and from giving expression of their talents. Following S. Roger's model, it could be said that in the Tibetan religious tradition, while there is no behavioral differentiation in the fact that both men and women can become religious specialists, still when it comes to upward mobility in the social and religious hierarchies, the differences between the two groups are considerable.

Cross-culturally, men have virtually monopolized all formal public roles.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in Tibetan culture men have control over all important positions of authority in the lay and ecclesiastic hierarchies. Taking ordination as a monk entails access to a variety of resources; educational, occupational, and economic, in addition to high social prestige. I am aware of the danger of treating monks as a uniform group. There are of course great differences in the power and prestige of individual monks, but as a group, compared to nuns, the monks' chances for education, economic support, and access to formal positions are much greater than is the case for nuns.

While women can achieve the formal role of a nun, they do not have access to full ordination as *bhikṣuṇī* in the Tibetan religious tradition, nor are there other prestigious positions for her to fill. The highest formal position a nun can attain is that of chanting-master or disciplinarian within the nunnery. The most important position in the Tibetan religious setting is that of the *tulku*, the reincarnate lama, and this is mainly reserved for men. If a nun is

recognized as a religious teacher or a lama, this is a matter of achieved status, a result of her exceptional abilities and years of religious practice. Nevertheless, although the nuns have little influence and power beyond the institutional structure of the nunnery, there are formal positions for them to fill within the nunnery, and being a nun entails a certain amount of prestige in Tibetan society. The fact that the ultimate authority of the nunnery may be in the hands of a male ecclesiastic who seldom visits it, gives the nuns control over their own institution in day-to-day affairs. This is the case for both exile nunneries in the Dharamsala area.

### 6.3. Ideological Differentiation

As pointed out above, there are great differences between Tibetan monks and nuns regarding their access to formal positions, to education, and to economic resources. We will now take a closer look at ideological aspects that serve to maintain and justify differential treatment of the two groups of religious specialists. Both C. Geertz and P. Berger focus on the role of actors in creating and maintaining religious ideas and ideologies. C. Geertz defines culture as:

an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (1973:89)

P. Berger defines religion as:

the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. (1967: 26)

P. Berger calls culture-building processes “world-construction” or “world-maintenance.” Like C. Geertz, he stresses the fact that opinions, values, goals, and truths are not entities in themselves, but social constructions that must constantly be created, adapted, maintained, and legitimated.<sup>37</sup>

### 6.3.1. *Attitudes Towards Nuns and Women in Buddhism*

The basic Buddhist doctrines: the four noble truths, the dependent arising phenomena (*pratīyasamutpadā*), and the eightfold path, are taught to monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen alike. There is nothing in the main Buddhist doctrines that discriminates between the sexes.

The actual situation for women and nuns during the first two centuries of Buddhist history seems to represent an improvement compared to pre-Buddhist times. I.B. Horner maintains that child marriages became less common, and the wife was granted greater equality with her husband. Being a mother of sons was no longer the only means to obtain a social position. Women came to be regarded as capable of leading independent religious lives. The fact that a separate Order of nuns was established, gave women the possibility of pursuing a religious and intellectual career. Nuns were seen as having equal opportunities for practicing the religious teachings and of harvesting the results thereof. Many nuns are reported to have reached Arhatship.<sup>38</sup>

### The Doctrine of Emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism

According to D. Paul the Mahāyāna texts vary from denying women the opportunity to enter the path of the Bodhisattva, to saying that a woman can reach Enlightenment if she changes her sex, and finally to stating that she can attain Enlightenment on the same terms as men.<sup>39</sup> Most of the Mahāyāna *sūtras* state that women are Bodhisattvas beginning their religious career, but to reach Buddhahood, they have to change their sex. Most Bodhisattvas are portrayed as male. However, the main theoretical foundation of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the idea of “emptiness” of all phenomena. All things are devoid of characteristics, the distinction into subject and object is denied, and *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are perceived as being one and the same. All beings have the Buddha nature, hence the distinction into female and male is false. Sex becomes irrelevant for the attainment of Enlightenment.

## Tantric Doctrines

Buddhist Tantra is based on the theoretical foundation of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but stresses meditation, yoga, and rituals for attaining Buddhahood. The male and female aspects of existence are recognized as different but equally indispensable aspects of reality. A fusion of the two in a primordial unity is to be attained in advanced Tantric rituals. Women are seen as important actors in Tantric rites and the fourteenth Tantric vow forbids discrimination of women.<sup>40</sup> The Tantric pantheon comprises many important goddesses, and the Tantric teachings, at least theoretically, give female religious specialists the same opportunity as men for reaching Enlightenment. Both monks and nuns in the Tibetan religious tradition share a belief in the main Buddhist doctrines. Both monks and nuns strive for the same ultimate aim, that of Liberation. In Tantric ideology both are conceived as having the same abilities for attaining this goal.

Based on the main Buddhist teachings, there is thus no ideological differentiation between monks and nuns. The fact that monks and lamas obtain all prestigious religious positions, and monopolize ritual and philosophical knowledge, cannot be justified according to the main Buddhist doctrines. S.C. Rogers states:

Because differential access to control of resources is not firmly grounded in differential ideology, behavioral differentiation may be perceived as unjust, immoral, or illegal, at least by the sex group without access to highly valued resources. A hierarchical relationship is evident with the other group in a higher or dominant position. (1978: 156)

Despite the fact that the main Buddhist doctrines do not devalue women, and Tantric ideology highly praises them, Tibetan nuns continue to find themselves at the bottom of the religious hierarchy. My suggestion is that 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. We will now investigate whether attitudes devaluing women found in early Buddhist texts are maintained in Tibetan culture, and whether these attitudes apply to the Tibetan nun.

How, then, is the behavioral differentiation of monks and nuns

legitimated? Dealing with ideology, there are several levels that need to be examined. Even though main religious doctrines do not devalue women, there can nevertheless exist textual, canonical justification for unequal treatment of the sexes. P. Berger stresses the fact that religion historically has been the most widespread and effective instrument of legitimation.<sup>41</sup>

### Misogynist Attitudes in Buddhist Texts

Although many nuns are recorded as having reached Liberation, certain misogynist attitudes can be discerned when the early canonical texts were written down. Several texts denigrate women and nuns. Women are described as lustful, fickle, deceitful, and evil. Women are sometimes seen as being less capable than men of obtaining Enlightenment. Such texts hardly advocate the original teaching of the Buddha, and may have been the result of the dominance of the Order of monks which found its legitimation in the rules governing monastic conduct, the *Vinaya Piṭaka*.

As mentioned above, several of the main rules concerning the Order of nuns definitely placed them in a position subordinate to that of the monks. The nuns had to conform to eight rules which prevented their autonomy and self-rule. One rule forbids nuns to teach monks, and they were thus discouraged from developing their intellectual capacities on equal terms with the monks. N. Falk thinks that failing economic support resulted in the disappearance of the Order of nuns in India several centuries before the breakdown of the Order of monks.<sup>42</sup>

#### 6.3.2. *Attitudes in Tibetan Culture Concerning the Nature of Women*

##### Woman's Passionate Nature

Monks, womenfolk end their life unsated and unreplete with two things. What two? Sexual intercourse and childbirth. These are the two things. (in D. Paul 1979:51)

There are numerous such passages in the early Buddhist texts that refer to the passion and lust of women,<sup>43</sup> and we might wonder whether the misogynist attitudes expressed in early Buddhist texts were imported along with Buddhism to Tibet. Possibly misogynist

attitudes also existed in Tibet before Buddhism was introduced, and it is likely that attitudes towards women found among Tibetans today are a blend of indigenous and imported ideas. To find the origin of different ideas and attitudes about the female sex is an extremely complicated matter and we will only examine prevalent attitudes towards women among Tibetans in exile, and if possible, point to parallels between these and old Indian misogynist ideas.

Several myth-theories postulate that myths are statements about, or reflect social factors.<sup>44</sup> Without undertaking an analysis of the Tibetan anthropogonic myth, we will call attention to certain elements in this myth that seem to be of importance concerning how the female sex is portrayed and possibly treated in Tibetan culture. There are several versions of the myth about the ogress and the ape as the ancestors of the Tibetans, and its main elements are well-known to all Tibetans. The strong sense of cultural identity among Tibetans is connected with this myth. The following excerpts are taken from a fourteenth century version.<sup>45</sup>

The male ape, who is a disciple of Avalokiteśvara, takes the vows of a layman (*upāsaka*) and goes to Tibet to meditate on Emptiness. Here he is tempted by a passionate female ogress. Because of actions in former lives she has been reborn as an ogress. She clings to the Bodhisattva-ape, and out of compassion he copulates with her. Six ape children are born, and after a few years they multiply into five hundred. The Bodhisattva then goes to Avalokiteśvara to lament his sorrows and says:

Because I did not know that marriage  
was the jailpit of the world  
and I did not know that I had been deceived  
by that demon that is woman,  
I am by the offspring thrown into  
the mire of the world.  
Because I did not understand that lust  
is a poisonous blade,  
I have been misled because from compassion  
I was filled with lust.

After the ape children are provided with the first cultivated food, they turn into humans. The myth goes on to explain the kinship of the Tibetan people. Because the Tibetans descend paternally from an ape and maternally from an ogress, they are divided into two



lineages. The ones that descend from the lineage of the father, the Bodhisattva-ape, are said to be:

patient and magnanimous, they are very compassionate and energetic, they rejoice in virtue, they speak gently and they are good at preaching.

The descendants tracing kinship to the mother, the ogress,

are full of lust and hatred, their thoughts are oriented towards bargaining and profit, they are greedy and quarrelsome, devoted to laughter, strong and brave, they do not stay with their actions even a minute, they are restless, in all their ways filled with the five kinds of poison, they are happy when hearing about the misfortunes of others and they are fierce.

In this myth we find a blend of pre-Buddhist and Buddhist elements, and when the myth was adopted by official Buddhism, it went through further re-interpretation. Avalokiteśvara was eventually identified with the ape, and Tārā with the ogress. When Tārā was identified with the ogress, the lustful aspects were tuned down.<sup>46</sup>

In the version of the myth given above, a stereotyped image of woman is given, not very different from how she was sometimes described in early Buddhist texts. Woman portrayed as lustful, deceitful, fickle, and aggressive, is a common theme in Indian literature. The passages of the myth given above, where the Bodhisattva-ape laments the nature of women, may reflect Indian elements incorporated into a traditional myth.

Referring to the anthropogonic myth, Tibetans today maintain the same attitudes towards women. B.D. Miller has carried out a study where she asked informants to give reactions to TaT tests. When dealing with the nature of men and women, her informants explicitly mentioned the anthropogonic myth:

The female Tibetans are descendants of the She-Ogress, hence the impetuous, violent, witch-like nature of women, and the males are descended from Chen-rezig in the form of the monkey ancestor, hence the calm, judicious, rational nature of men. (1980:160)<sup>47</sup>

S. Ortner states that in Sherpa culture there are two kinds of people who are considered to be more greedy than others, viz. monks and women.<sup>48</sup> In Tibetan culture there is thus the notion of

women as lustful, aggressive, greedy, fickle, and demonlike, while men are seen as composed and rational. Men are seen as victims of the passion of women. Do these attitudes also apply to the Tibetan nun?

### The Moral Character of Tibetan Nuns

Tibetan nuns are bound to the same vow of celibacy as the monks. However, there appear to be differences in attitudes in Tibetan culture concerning the moral integrity of monks and nuns. When I first came to Dharamsala and started inquiring about nuns, I heard much gossip about nuns breaking their vows and getting pregnant. I was often told to read the Akhu Thompa stories which deal with nuns.<sup>49</sup> These stories make fun of the nuns, and hint at their passionate nature. The stories are known by all Tibetans, and one of my nun informants expressed the view that they are a disgrace to the nuns. One western nun told me that for years the lay people in the community where she was living were gossiping about her, saying that she was breaking her vows by having a relationship with her lama.

I also encountered lots of jokes, particularly among young men, about the lax morality of nuns; on the other hand, informants claimed that it is very seldom that nuns disrobe. A Tibetan nun informant said that she did not know whether Tibetans conceived of women as more lustful than men, but stated:

If for instance a nun becomes pregnant, it is always considered her fault. There are monks who break their vows, and people might say: 'Oh, he used to be a monk before,' and that is all they have to comment. However, if a nun breaks her vows there will be a lot of gossip. Nuns used to be admitted to the Buddhist University at Sarnath, but because of some affairs between monks and nuns there, the nuns are not allowed to enter anymore. The nuns were blamed, but actually, the deed is the same for both monks and nuns.

### One nun informant related:

When I go to Dharamsala, I am always very careful not to talk with men. If I am spoken to by a man, I look in a different direction and try my best to look disinterested. I do not dare to look up into his face, or to meet his eyes. Only one time have I been walking with men in Dharamsala, and then I was with my uncle and another relative, and then I felt quite safe from the gossip.

Another nun said:

If I was only to communicate with a monk by letters, and people came to know about it, there would be a lot of gossip. We nuns are watched more carefully than the monks. When monks travel, for instance, they are allowed to wear lay clothes. If any of us nuns were to dress in a laywoman's clothes, even when travelling, there would be a lot of talk.

Sometimes I heard comments about the way nuns dressed; if nuns were wearing attractive blouses, or in other ways taking care of their outward appearance, it was maintained that this was done in order to attract men.

There is historical continuity in the Buddhist tradition from its early days concerning the fact that nuns have to watch their actions more carefully than monks do. C. Kabilsingh, in her comparative work on the *Bhikkhunīpāṭimokkha* states:

In regard to cases leading to misbehaviour in sexual desires, the bhikkhunīs have to take a stronger guard than the bhikkhus. (1984:55)

The inferior position of nuns in Tibetan society makes them an easy object for scorn and ridicule. Among the Sherpas it appears that also laywomen are more often gossiped about than men. B. Aziz states:

Both privately and publicly, D'ing-ri-wa constantly gossip about the domestic affairs of others, volunteering criticisms as to their behaviour. Comments and opinions about the *na-ma*<sup>50</sup> seem most common. Even when gossip concerns a man, the matter is discussed not in terms of his personality, but in terms of his *na-ma*. Whether a man is a successful trader, a gambler, a drunkard, a layabout, or a charlatan, his life style is very often attributed to the influence of his *na-ma*. (1978: 178)

### Women as Emotionally Unstable

Related to the idea that women have more emotional energy than men, is the view that women are more unstable, that it is more difficult for her to discipline herself. In the Tibetan tradition there is also the attitude that women are deceitful and fickle. One male informant stated:

Women have sharp minds, but to be a good religious practitioner, it is

not enough to have a sharp mind. Because woman's mind is so sharp, she thinks very much, but her thinking changes all the time. Therefore, it is difficult for her to stay in one place and to pursue a religious practice in one direction.

A *tulku* stated:

Women are more intelligent than men. This is because they are more sensitive. But there is the general feeling among people that women are deceitful as well. One cannot get the truth from a woman. Her mind is not very stable, it is fickle. Therefore, it is easier for a man to practice religion.

A Tibetan nun informant maintained:

There is the idea that woman's mind is sharper than that of men's. This is because woman is the manifestation of Wisdom. She has more wisdom, and therefore she has got more ideas. Therefore, she also has more problems than men. There are all kinds of problems, often emotional problems. She has more ups and downs.

Another young nun stated:

When a man's mind changes one time, the mind of a woman changes a hundred times.

Jetsun Kusho Luding Chime maintains:

Nuns have more Vinaya vows to follow than men, but that is because women's minds are sharper and have more thoughts, therefore there are more rules to relate to. (TVS VI, 2 1983–1984:8)

On the one hand, women are seen as deceitful and fickle and as having problems disciplining themselves, while on the other hand, women are conceived of as being intelligent, as Wisdom incarnate. However, the intelligence of women is not regarded as an aid for them in philosophical and logical studies; their minds are not fit for such subjects, but rather for meditation. Men are regarded as having the ability to work slowly and diligently towards an aim; this, together with their calm nature and great self-control, are conceived of as great assets when it comes to mastering the voluminous philosophical scriptures. In an interview, Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo states:

Some people say that women are more inclined to contemplative prac-

tice, . . . I can see that this is not a discriminatory observation. I do find that women naturally gravitate toward contemplation. It seems to be very natural, very fulfilling. But I balk at the concept of women necessarily having to do meditation and chanting rather than study. (TVS VIII, 5 1986:6)<sup>51</sup>

### Tibetan Nuns as Unable to Keep Advanced Vows

One view of woman's fickleness and emotional unstableness is the notion that she is not able to keep higher levels of vows. A *tulku* stated:

A general Buddhist view, based on the Sanskrit tradition, is that women have more emotional energy. Due to this they suffer from affections and are therefore unable to hold more advanced vows.

The Sanskrit tradition to which this *tulku* refers might reflect the attitudes of monastics, but may not accurately portray general sentiments in the Tibetan community.

One of the most capable and educated young Tilokpur nuns was advised by a learned and respected lama to delay taking the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. The reason given was that there are so many vows for a woman to keep. Accordingly, the nun decided to postpone her ordination. A Tibetan laywoman seemed to doubt whether nuns can keep the *bhikṣuṇī* vows. She stated:

I do think that the Tibetan nuns should go to Hong Kong to obtain the *gelongma* (*bhikṣuṇī*) ordination. There are many vows to keep, but if they can keep the vows, then I guess it is all right.

Another laywoman informant said that nuns are not asked to perform rituals in the houses of lay people, because the nuns then tend to lose their vows. Some Tibetans thus regard woman's unstable emotional nature as an obstacle for keeping higher vows, and this may discourage Tibetan nuns from taking the full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Although some Tibetans may be sceptical of nuns taking the full ordination, some high lamas and several of the nuns wish to introduce the full ordination for nuns into Tibetan culture.<sup>52</sup>

### 6.3.3. *Why Women Choose to Become Nuns*

While men are generally regarded as having purely religious motives for becoming monks, the motives of women for becoming nuns are often doubted. K. March states that among the Sherpas, there are three general opinions about why women become nuns:

- (1) Old women who, when their husbands died before them, decided to turn to religion and live out their days in the monasteries;
- (2) Women who, because they were ugly or deformed, decided to turn to religion and live in the monasteries;
- (3) Women who, out of true religious zeal, even though they could have married and/or stayed with husbands, chose to live religious lives at the monasteries. (1979:289)

Among Tibetans too, there are conceptions that only unsuccessful women become nuns, the ones that are too ugly to find a husband, or the physically and mentally handicapped. A middle-aged laywoman maintained:

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.<sup>53</sup>

#### Becoming a Nun after Lay Life Proves Futile

In the nunnery in Tilokpur there are no women who have been married prior to entering the nunnery. In Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala, there are several *genchö* nuns, that is, women who have taken ordination when they are old.<sup>54</sup> One of the *genchö* nuns at Geden Choeling, Thupten Noendzum<sup>55</sup> related the following about why she became a nun:

We had barely established ourselves when fate struck again. My husband died when I was 34 and I was at my wit's end. However, whether I understood the law of cause and effect or not, time passed on and three weeks after this fateful event I decided to become a nun. (TN 1985:14)

Another of the *genchö* nuns from the same nunnery, Dawa Choden, born in 1924, was married into a well-to-do family in Tibet, and had three children with her first husband. Her husband died

when he was young, and Dawa Choeden and her children were taken care of by her in-laws. In exile, Dawa Choeden married for the second time. For some years the couple stayed in Canada. In 1979, she was ordained a nun, and entered Geden Choeling Nunnery. She states:

I had tasted the life of the rich in Tibet, but life in Canada taught me a different kind of affluence, the happiness of a contented heart and comradeship among friends in adversity. So, I did not want to become rich again but only to have enough money to live without financial worries and to be able to go back to India . . . As no one believed me I surprised them all when I returned in 1979 to become a nun and to stay. A hut had been built for me and I moved in. That same year His Holiness the Dalai Lama ordained me a nun, the first nun His Holiness ever ordained. On that day my spiritual life began, my real life began . . . I know now that the things I enjoyed doing in my youth did not give me any peace of mind, they were like drinking salt-water, producing a greater thirst for more. I have found inner peace in my life in the nunnery. (TN 1984:19–20)

In the Bonpo community in Dolanji, there are two resident *genchö* nuns, Phumo and Kalsang Lhamo, both in their late sixties (1984). They were both given lay vows (*genyen*) and the haircutting ceremony by Tendzin Namdak in 1980.<sup>56</sup> Phumo comes from a nomad family from Hor in eastern Tibet. She had been engaged in road work in Manali for six years when she came to Dolanji in 1967. Phumo wears monastic robes and spends most of her day turning a huge prayer-wheel. Kalsang Lhamo has been married and her husband is dead. Her son is a monk in Menri Monastery. At the time I visited her, the son was doing a retreat in their little house, and the mother was serving him. Kalsang Lhamo has finished her preliminary practices, and spends her days in meditation and in turning a prayer-wheel. She does not know how to read and write. These two Bonpo nuns do not have any religious functions to perform in the lay community, and their status is rather low compared to the monks.

Among both lay people and nuns, I found that the term *genchö* is used in a rather derogatory way. Informants commented that if a person takes ordination when becoming old, there is no renunciation involved in the decision. They want to obtain the benefits of both worlds. Several of the Tilokpur nuns explained that it was difficult for *genchö* to adjust to monastic discipline, as they have



*The Bonpo nun Phumo in Dolanji.*

their own ideas about how to organize things. One nun stated that “such nuns” were therefore not admitted to the nunnery, while another maintained that there was no restriction to admitting *genchö* as such, only that very old nuns who could not take care of themselves could not be admitted.<sup>57</sup>

Neither among the Sherpas are *genchö* as highly regarded as those entering the Order when young. The Sherpas maintain that it is particularly women who become nuns after their spouse is dead. K. March states:

In fact, there are similar numbers of older men who entered upon the death of a wife, although popular understanding of the reasons why a man would become a monastic does not reflect this. Generally, all men are presumed to have entered because of a true religious vocation. (1979:289)

### Do Only Ugly and Handicapped Women Become Nuns?

A young *tulku* stated:

Some people say that women become nuns because they are not able to find a husband. I do not think this is the whole truth. There are several pretty nuns in Dharamsala Nunnery.



It is a general conception among some Tibetans that nunneries are filled with ugly, deformed, and mentally retarded nuns – women who are a total failure in lay life. This conception reflects that, for a woman, becoming a monastic is the second-best choice. This stereotype concerning nuns' motives has been maintained also by western scholars. C. von Furer-Haimendorf is influenced by this conception when writing about Sherpa nuns:

But the number of nuns in Devuche remained fairly stable, for there was a hard core of those unlikely to find husbands even if they were thus inclined. (1972:138)

My data do not support this general conception about nuns. Several of my nun informants explicitly stated that they wanted to pursue their religious careers, and that marriage would be an obstacle to this goal. Several of the Tilokpur nuns describe married life as one filled with suffering. Showing her relief, one young nun said:

Just think about it; if it wasn't for the fact that Freda Bedi made it possible for me to come to Tilokpur, I would probably have been married and had a couple of kids by now. Then I wouldn't have had the chance to pursue my religious practice.

Although the above statement about the suffering in lay life is in accordance with the religious ideology, I see no reason to doubt the sincerely religious motives of my informant.

There are also numerous examples of nuns who ran away to nunneries to avoid marriage, some because they did not want the marriage arranged by their family, but others because married life would restrict their opportunity to lead a life in accordance with their religious aspirations. R. Ray, when discussing accomplished women in Tantric Buddhism, states:

These biographies present an interesting evaluation of the impact of marriage on men and women's spiritual aspirations. One often finds vividly negative depictions of both. Marriage is frequently portrayed as spiritually unproductive, and men as hostile and dangerous to spiritual aspirations and completely lacking in spirituality themselves. (1980: 230)

The great *yoginī* Machig (1062–1150) is reported to have acted insane to avoid marriage:

When Ma-gcig had reached the age of 14, she was given in marriage to a man of the locality named A-ba Lha-rgyal. She felt disgusted with family life and said to (her husband): “Husband! You should practise religion, and I shall also take it up!” As he was unwilling to listen (to her words), she simulated insanity and they separated. From the age of 17 to 22, she acted as the Tantric assistant (*mudrā*) of the bLa-ma rMa. (BA:221)<sup>60</sup>

Several other accomplished *yoginīs* acted similarly, such as the nuns Yage Kunsang Drolma and Jetsunla, both of whom ran away before getting married, and the nun Palchung who escaped to a nunnery after having been beaten by her in-laws.<sup>61</sup> The nun Yeshe Drolma went on a long pilgrimage to western Tibet to escape being married off by her family.<sup>62</sup>

There are socio-economic factors that may account for the fact that some Tibetan women chose to become nuns. Tibetan residence is generally patrilocal, i.e. the woman moves to her husband’s family upon marriage. The Tibetan woman is thus faced with the prospect of being ill-treated by her in-laws and often longs to be back with her family in her natal village. B. Aziz states that the jewellery given to women as dowry is a symbol of a wife’s status. If a woman loses the property rights over her necklace it may be difficult for her to remarry. She writes:

If she leaves of her own volition, without good cause, she has to forfeit her rights to the jewellery. This is discouraged since it makes it almost impossible for her to be remarried. Her own family will not accept her back at her former status, nor can it provide another dowry, so she is often forced to accept a subservient role to her brother’s wife or to become an itinerant or nun. (1978:172–173)

Although some of the nuns mentioned above wished to avoid marriage because it hampered their possibilities of devoting their lives to religion, some no doubt undertook ordination to avoid the hardships and suffering of lay life. For some of these women, becoming a nun may have been the only alternative left for them, and this fact, rather than a religious longing, might have been the main motive for joining a nunnery.

In the nunneries in Tilokpur and Dharamsala, there are both very intelligent and pretty nuns, and several of them are educated above the usual level of laywomen.<sup>63</sup> As the majority of the nuns in Tilokpur are very poor and without family, staying in a nunnery

gives them the social security difficult to obtain in lay life. However, there are also nuns whose families have economic resources to provide for them outside the nunnery. Several of them could no doubt have managed quite well, either by marrying or by fending for themselves. One young layman wondered why one of the most educated nuns in Tilokpur chose to be a nun. He expressed his bewilderment, as this nun was both pretty and intelligent.

There is also the conception that for serious religious practitioners, staying in a nunnery is a waste of time. This is because there are no organized study programs offered there, and also the rigorous duties and regulations of the nunneries make it hard to pursue individual meditation practice. A western nun wondered why this same nun was still “wasting” her time in the nunnery. She thought this nun could have excelled more in religious practice if she had practiced meditation on her own. The Tilokpur nun herself views the situation differently. She knows what her possibilities in lay life are, but still she wants to be a nun and stay on in the nunnery. As far as religious practice is concerned, she is aware of the fact that she has little time for individual religious studies, but she thinks that by serving the nunnery she will earn a lot of merit, and be of help to other nuns.

Another of the well-educated nuns from Tilokpur was offered a sponsorship to go to college. However, she had discontinued her studies in an English medium school for the very reason that she wanted to become a nun. She was aware that she could have taken ordination after finishing school, but did not prefer lay education to taking ordination and joining the nunnery. This nun has also been encouraged to start studying at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, but instead of intellectual studies, she maintained that she wants to pursue meditation and yoga practices, which is consistent with the stress the Kagyupa School puts on practical religious training.

In Tilokpur there are no nuns with physical handicaps or mental disorders. When I was staying in Tilokpur, one nun who supposedly had some mental problems had asked to be admitted. At the time there was discussion whether this would disqualify her, but the ultimate decision lay with the chief lama of the nunnery. In other nunneries I have visited there were one or two nuns with either physical or mental disorders, but in monasteries there are also monks of this category. According to the *Vinaya*, persons

with mental or physical disorders are debarred from taking full ordination.<sup>64</sup>

The sentiment in the nunnery is one that guards against the temptations of lay life. One nun from Kinnaur, who was ordained when she was eighteen years old, brought a photo to the nunnery, showing herself in her traditional costume. Her room-mate in the nunnery told her that by looking at the picture, she would be tempted to return to lay life. Accordingly, the Kinnauri nun tore up the photo. The older nuns in Tilokpur are conservative concerning the behaviour and appearance of the younger nuns. They react negatively to “robe fashions” and against certain amusements enjoyed by young nuns.

### Pure Motivation?

When asked why they decided to become nuns, most of my informants maintained that it was their own independent wish, motivated by the suffering inherent in lay life and/or an inclination to religion. One might ask what in fact constitutes a “pure” motivation for becoming a monk or a nun. The Buddhist teaching describing suffering as the main cause for embracing a religious life is considered the most legitimate motivation. However, among Tibetans there is a tendency to evaluate motivations. Informants say that there are some who come of their own will and others who have been put into the nunneries by their parents. Nuns who have been inclined to religious behavior all their lives and who have taken ordination when they were young are more highly regarded than nuns who are placed in the nunneries by their parents or relatives, or those who join because they have nowhere else to stay. Ultimately, the religious practice and sincerity of a nun determine her status within the nunnery and in the lay community.

It may be the case that nunneries in exile are refuges for the poor to a greater extent than was the case in Tibet. A Gelugpa *tulku* maintained that well-to-do families in exile send their children to college, while the poor send them to monasteries. A middle-aged laywoman also mentioned that it is more often the case that the very poor send their daughters to nunneries in exile than was the case in Tibet. The data from Tilokpur show that about half the nuns there are orphans and the majority come from poor families.

What should be noted is the fact that many Tibetans question the motives of women who want to become nuns. Since the early days of Buddhism, women have met with such suspicions, and this makes us wonder whether ancient Indian attitudes about the debased nature of women make themselves somewhat felt also in the Tibetan context. There are other factors also, such as the insignificance of the nunnery as a religious institution, the poor economic circumstances of nunneries, the lack of access to official positions for nuns, and their restricted religious functions in lay society. These factors contribute to make the position of nuns in Tibetan society much less prestigious than the position of monks. These are some of the reasons that make people wonder why anyone should want to become a nun. It is often asked whether it is not just as good for women to remain pious laywomen instead of choosing the "miserable life of a nun." However, as we have showed above, several of the nuns could have chosen alternative careers. Although becoming a nun does not give all the advantages that accrue from becoming a monk, it need not be surmised that worldly status and power are necessarily lacking among their motives, and that hence their motivation is more "purely religious" than that of many monks. Based on my impressions of Tibetan nuns, I want to stress the rationality in their choice of career. By taking ordination, merit is maximized, and for most of the nuns I interviewed, this accumulation of merit seems to be a strongly motivating factor. Furthermore, all things considered, the status of a nun is generally higher than that of a layperson.<sup>65</sup> When asked why women choose to become nuns, a middle-aged Tibetan laywoman exclaimed:

In all of Tibet both monks and nuns were highly respected. Because the Tibetans highly respect religion, girls go to join nunneries.

Several of the Tibetan lay people that I formally interviewed stated that monks and nuns are given the same respect in Tibetan society, although some of them admitted that monks were more learned. It was only after staying in the field for some time that I came to realize the truth of the words of a young Tibetan nun informant:

Well, there are differences in how monks and nuns are treated. You

don't have to judge from what people say, you can just look for yourself and you will find these differences.

Unequal opportunities for monks and nuns are in no way unique to the Tibetan context. This inequality seems to have long historical roots and is maintained in Buddhist countries today,<sup>66</sup> where the situation is far worse than among Tibetans.

#### 6.3.4. *The Humbleness of Nuns*

Since the inception of the Order of nuns, nuns have been expected to behave deferentially towards monks. One of the eight regulations said to have been set forth by the Buddha as conditions for allowing women to enter the Order states:

An almswoman, even if of a hundred years standing, shall make Salutation to, shall rise up in the presence of, shall bow down before, and shall perform all proper duties towards an almsman, if only just initiated. This is a rule to be revered and revered, honoured and observed, and her life long never to be transgressed. (cited from I.B. Horner, 1975:119)

Mahāpajāpatī is said to have asked the Buddha about this decree: whether the rule of seniority should not be according to the status of the monk or the nun, instead of being determined by their sex. The Buddha, however, is reported to have refused to change this ordinance.<sup>67</sup> If not to the letter, the content of this rule is maintained in Tibetan monastic culture. A Tibetan nun stated:

The general idea is that if you are a nun you should go around and respect all kinds of monks. We don't have to greet them every time we see them, but we always let them have their way, and we nuns just stand by and we are humble. If a woman or a nun should dare to walk up among the monks and say something, they would ridicule her. 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 generations, and it is an accepted fact in Tibetan society. Few have questioned these norms. We are brought up to think that because you are a woman you are inferior.

It is a Tibetan custom that more respected and higher status persons are seated higher and before people of lesser importance.

This is practiced among lay people as well as among religious specialists.<sup>68</sup> When public ceremonies and religious teachings are given in the main temple of H.H. the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, the monks occupy the larger part of the shrine-room, while the nuns are seated behind them. Because of the larger numbers of monks, this means that the nuns' seating is usually in the back by the main entrance. The lay people sit behind the nuns, usually outside.

In recent years, as their numbers have grown, the nuns have sometimes come to occupy fully a third of the space inside the temple, though still seated behind the monks in deference to *Vinaya* procedures and Tibetan social customs. In the Chinese tradition, *bhikṣuṇīs* are always placed before novice monks; it remains to be seen what adjustments will be made within the Tibetan tradition as the numbers of *bhikṣuṇīs* increase.

In H.E. Situ Rinpoche's temple in Sherab Ling, nuns often take part in the rituals. If the young monks are not present, the nuns can have a seat below, but in the same rows as the monks. If the young monks are present, however, there is not enough space for the nuns, and they sit on the floor in the back of the temple. A similar seating of Sherpa monks and nuns is described by K. March.<sup>69</sup> Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo commented:

Somebody has to sit first. It is not really wise to have monks and nuns sitting all mixed up together, because desire and attachment can easily arise in such close proximity. It can be problematic if a certain sequence of seniority, as prescribed in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, is not observed in the seating arrangements. Amongst the westerners, for instance, where there is no pecking order, there are endless squabbles over seating. In the future it may be possible, as in the Chinese tradition, to seat the monks on one side of the temple and the nuns on the other side. At present, though, there is really no alternative to seating the monks first.<sup>70</sup>

In general, these customs are still observed amongst Tibetans today. For example, at the New Year Prayer Festival in 1984, when the *saṅgha* members filed through the main entrance to receive a donation, the monks preceded the nuns. When walking along the road, it is considered good manners for younger monks to defer to senior monks, and for nuns to defer to all monks. These customs have value in engendering politeness and respect,

but tend to erode the confidence of the nuns who may come to doubt their own worth in that they are always treated second-best.

Among Tibetans in exile, there are differences in how older and younger nuns behave towards monks and lamas. Some of the younger nuns find it funny that older nuns still greet high lamas in the traditional Tibetan way, by extending their tongue. When I first started inquiring among the Tilokpur nuns about their religious practices, hardly any of them wanted to express their opinions, but referred me to one of the head nuns. This, they said, was because they felt insecure about their own knowledge. One of the well-educated young Tilokpur nuns stated that she was trying to teach the other nuns to have more self-confidence. She felt that she herself was more outspoken than the other nuns in conversations with monks and lamas. She felt that it was important for the nuns to express their views so that they would be taken seriously. This informant maintained that she did not agree with the unequal treatment given to monks and nuns. She stated:

Why do nuns always have to behave humbly, and sit in the back? In the temple of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, during a specific prayer, women cannot enter the temple. Even though we have less knowledge than the monks, the monks should be humble and let us in so that we can learn.

The prayer in question is no doubt the recitation of the *Bhikṣu-prātimokṣasūtra*. Neither novice monks nor novice nuns are permitted to be present during the recitation of this *sūtra*, which is part of the confession ceremony held twice a month for monks and nuns. The same would apply during the recitation of the *Bhikṣuṇīprātimokṣasūtra* by fully ordained nuns.

The nun Yeshe Drolma who is well-known for her good practice and meditation, and who is called *gomchen* (great meditator), kept telling me that she did not know anything, and that the story of her life was not worth recording.<sup>71</sup> She kept touching her forehead to mine, which in Tibetan tradition indicates equality of rank. This nun is known among Tibetans in the Dharamsala area as being an excellent religious practitioner. An old Tilokpur nun stated that while western nuns have strong minds and practice religion conscientiously, the Tibetan nuns are too humble. Therefore she thought the western nuns would become accomplished. A young nun stated:



The Tibetan nuns do not have the same ambitions that some western nuns have. We are more humble and simple, but maybe this will change.

When asserting their right to be treated more equally with monks, some young Tibetan nuns are challenging very firm and well-established codes of behaviour. A young *tulku* stated:

The Tibetans can understand that western nuns request education. As regards Tibetan women themselves, the Tibetans might not accept it if they claim to be educated. People think that nuns should be humble. Also, older Tibetan nuns might not agree with some younger nuns who want to be educated along with the monks.

Several monks and lamas expressed the view that old habits and customs inhibit nuns from obtaining education and positions in the Tibetan religious hierarchy. On the other hand, informants maintained that there are no rules or regulations stopping the nuns from acquiring more knowledge or from doing more and better religious practice. They seem to think that the nuns themselves are responsible for the state of affairs, and that it is entirely up to the nuns themselves to change their situation. One lama stated:

In the area I came from in western Tibet, the nuns made themselves very "small" (in the meaning unimportant).

Others recognize that nuns are not encouraged. A young lama claimed:

If nuns are educated, they use their knowledge for their own use. I don't think the nuns themselves have any plans to make a great impact. They don't compete with the monks, but keep to themselves. Then of course there are no recognized positions for nuns to occupy, they do not, for example, rise to the position of religious teachers. There is no real encouragement for them.

While there is a general conception among Tibetans that nuns should behave humbly, this is a cultural stereotype that is not always adhered to. During my fieldwork, I had the chance to observe the nuns taking care of their economic interests vis a vis the Indian population. At one time one of the head nuns in Tilokpur started an argument with an Indian restaurant owner about the bill. She voiced her opinion loudly and in a forceful manner in

front of fifteen Indian men. Also in their relations with the Indians in Tilokpur, the nuns take an active role in maintaining their interests. Furthermore, some Tilokpur nuns said that they feel pity for Indian women, who have to get married when they are young, who have to behave very deferentially towards men, and who cannot move about on their own.

### 6.3.5. *Rebirth as a Male?*

J. Willis has translated the following excerpt from the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, a Mahāyāna text from the fourth century AD, composed by Asaṅga:

Completely perfected Buddha-s are not women. And why? Precisely because a bodhisattva (i.e., one on his way to complete enlightenment), from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable age (of his career) has completely abandoned the woman's estate (*strībhāvam*). Ascending (thereafter) to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. (1985:69)

A. Wayman and H. Wayman state:

It was general in Buddhist scriptures to place an upper limit on the spiritual progress of women," . . . "the theory of female limitation went hand in hand with the view that a woman by reason of her merit and devotion can have a transmutation of her sex into that of a male, and in this mode continue the progress to the supreme goal. (1974:35)

In Tibetan culture there are mixed opinions about the need for women to be reborn as men in order to reach advanced levels of spiritual realization. There is a Tibetan prayer that women regularly say, where they hope that women of the world will be reborn as men.<sup>72</sup> One informant claimed that most Tibetan women include this in their evening prayers. A layman from eastern Tibet told me that his mother said this prayer every day, but that he did not think it should be understood literally. A young, quite well-educated nun informant maintained that both laywomen and nuns say this prayer. When I asked her if she herself wanted to be reborn as a man, she stated:

It will depend. Think for instance that you are born as a butcher or a fisherman or as a thief. In those cases I don't think there is much point in being a male. I would rather be a female and live a good simple life,

than be a male and be a butcher or something like that. As a female, you can be a good religious practitioner, or at least you can lead a good simple life. I have also heard that the male birth is seventeen times higher than the birth of a female. Just think about all the difficulties that there are in being a woman, and the inferior position that we have in society. 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.

My informant several times expressed the view that the life of a woman, that is, a simple life, is much better than some of the more negative life-styles a Tibetan man may take up. She maintained that there are numerous difficulties in the life of women, but seemed to think that except for the above-mentioned occupations, it is better to be a man.<sup>73</sup> Later on in the interview, the same nun stated:

Actually, I do not see the reason for the inequality between men and women. I really do not see why we are so inferior that there are many things that a nun shouldn't do. It feels like getting a big slap in the face, we feel very sad and hurt, but there is nothing we can do about it.

A young *tulku* stated:

There are probably different theories about whether it is possible to reach Enlightenment in the body of a woman. Some Tibetans say that only men have this possibility.

A young educated nun maintained that she had heard that the birth of a male is seventeen times higher than that of a female. She stated:

We Tibetan women think that we are born as women because we deserve it. Somewhere in an Amitābha text it is warned against being re-born as a woman. A learned lama has explained to me that this is because it is easier for men to practice the Dharma. But like Tārā, I want to reach Enlightenment in the body of a woman.

There is a myth about Tārā's spiritual origin:

A beginningless time ago, we are told, there was a worldly realm named Various Lights, in which there appeared a Tathāgata named Sound of Drums, and to him the princess Moon of Wisdom showed

great faith and devotion. For a thousand billion years she did reverence to the Buddha and the measureless host of his retinue, the Bodhisattvas and Worthy Ones, and finally she awakened the supreme thought of enlightenment. "The proper thing to do," the monks then said to the princess, "is to make an earnest wish that your body (with which you attend to the teachings) may become that of a man, for surely this desire will be granted." She replied: "Since there is no such thing as a 'man' or a 'woman' (and no such thing as a 'self' or a 'person' or 'awareness') this bondage to male and female is hollow: Oh how worldly fools delude themselves!" And this is the earnest wish she made: "Those who wish to attain supreme enlightenment in a man's body are many, but those who wish to serve the aims of beings in a woman's body are few indeed; therefore may I, until this world is emptied out, serve the aim of beings with nothing but the body of a woman. (S. Beyer, 1978:64-65)

After the princess had meditated for a thousand billion years, she reached supreme awareness. By the power of her meditation she saved a thousand billion beings every morning and she thus became the famed Tārā, the Saviouress.<sup>74</sup> Tārā's resolution, i.e. to become enlightened in the body of a woman, resembles the message given in several popular Mahāyāna *sūtras*,<sup>75</sup> that sex is irrelevant to attainment of the ultimate aim, that of Buddhahood. A young, well-educated nun informant stated:

I think that if one has enough diligence, strong faith, and a good teacher, then one can achieve the highest goal even if you are only a female.

From other conversations with this nun, it was obvious that she believes a male incarnation to be better than that of a female. A middle-aged laywoman stated:

I do not agree that women need to be reborn as men. From a religious point of view, there is no point to pray like this, because men and women are equal. From lay people's point of view, when they get a boy-child they are more happy. I don't think that it is easier for men to practice religion than it is for women.

### The Concept that it is Easier for Men to Practice Religion

According to my informants, the preference for being reborn as a man is connected with the fact that it is easier for a man to engage

in religious practice. A middle-aged Tibetan laywoman, when asked about the prayer women say to be reborn as men, exclaimed:

We ask to be reborn as men because it is easier to practice religion as a man. It is difficult for women to stay alone in hermitages in the mountains and in remote areas. Also men are free from childbirth. It is not meant that one can not reach release in a woman's body.

One young *tulku*, when asked the same question, stated:

Women think men have more advantages than women. They think a man has an easier life, that there are more possibilities for men, for example in politics, that he can get jobs in the government etc. Women stay at home. Life is harder for women.

A young layman (a former monk) maintained:

If you want to be a religious practitioner, there are many disadvantages for women. Women have more enemies than men, because people see more advantages in a woman. For example, it is difficult for her to meditate in a lonely cave. Then there is menstruation and childbirth, and special diseases that only women get.

The above statements indicate that there are different opinions about woman's opportunity for reaching Enlightenment. None of my informants stated that women cannot reach the ultimate goal, only that it is easier for a man to practice religion. There is a conception that it is dangerous for women to meditate in desolate places. In secluded places women can be threatened by men and wild animals. The nun Jetsunla travelled mostly by night to avoid being harassed by men.<sup>76</sup> Woman's role as a child-bearer and child-rearer is seen as detrimental to the practice of religion, involving emotional ties to family and children which bind her to the cycle of rebirth and suffering. In addition, women have the discomforts and pains of menstruation. These arguments, combined with the conception that women have problems disciplining themselves to do advanced religious practice, and the fact that they do not achieve worldly fame or positions, make Tibetans think that it is more favorable to be reborn as a male.

### 6.3.6. *The Pollution of Women*

Several scholars see pollution beliefs as a symbolic expression of inferiority. S. Ortner states that some of the cultural factors relegating woman to an inferior position are:

symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as implicitly making a statement on inferior valuation. (1974:69)

Among Tibetans there exist no strong pollution taboos, as are found for instance in Indian culture. However, there are some notions about pollution that relate to menstruation and childbirth.<sup>22</sup>

B. Aziz states:

Birth in D'ing-ri brings impurity to the entire household, and all members are confined to the house for several days. No one may enter or leave, neither to deliver the baby nor to announce the birth. It is not the pollution that is so excluding but the presence of dangerous *nö-pa* spirits who threaten the safety of the infant and its mother," and "A *dr'a-pa* is called to the house a week or so later to perform a brief purification called *tr'ül-söl*, and his departure is the sign to neighbours and *ga-nye* that they may now come and extend warm wishes and their *nga-lag* gift. (1978:251–252)

R.D. Taring writes:

It was also believed that childbirth caused a lot of infection and some people avoided visiting a new mother until her room had been disinfected by a lama sprinkling holy water and saying special prayers. (1970:109)

A monk is needed to re-establish a condition of purity. Religious specialists are considered to be more pure and as having a more effective contact with the spirit realm. Monks and lamas are often perceived as being more pure than for instance nuns, and nuns are considered more pure than laywomen. Thus, even though a woman has embraced religion and lives a celibate life, she is still a woman. Ria Reis, who has done fieldwork in Ladakh, found that:

a woman is thought of as being less pure than a man, for a woman, unlike a man is going through a period of impurity each time she is having her menses. Death and child-birth too are attended with impurity. . . . Actual taboos, however, apply only in relation to the gods and the

sacred places. During her menses a woman can perform all religious activities, as long as she does not enter a monastery or a temple, including her own house-temple. (1981:225–6)

Among Tibetan nuns also this concept of impurity is found. One nun stated that she would not touch her personal shrine, nor the altar in the shrine-room of nunneries and monasteries when she was menstruating. She stated that she herself was very particular about this, but that other nuns did not care so much. She also claimed that the nuns had to be careful not to use yellow socks or petticoats, as this colour is worn by monks. This is because their menstruation blood could stain these garments, implying a symbolical defilement of monks and lamas. There were several nuns present when my informant gave this statement, and they seemed to agree with her views. Another nun informant told me that she once visited a very high lama during her menstrual period:

I was doing prostrations and I was feeling so impure and feeling very guilty. I was thinking that I was defiling the lama who is so pure, like a crystal or a lotus. By his intuition, however, the lama knew what I was thinking and he told me that there is no such thing as pure and impure.

The nun maintained that this idea of women being impure during the menstrual period is just a self-conscious thing. The lama who, she stressed, is very wise, had expressed that such ideas are only products of our own minds. A layman from eastern Tibet said:

In the area where I lived, men were almost regarded as gods. The women could never touch our guns nor our amulets, nor enter the personal chambers of the men. There was some kind of impurity connected with women.

Another layman from Kham told me that women in the area where he was brought up were not allowed to touch the Tibetan Buddhist Canon, the Kanjur. It is possible also that the traditional restriction on allowing women to enter the Mahākāla shrines in Tibetan monasteries is connected with woman's "pollution".

More research needs to be done on the concept of pollution among Tibetans. However, the general notion of women as being less pure than men, and of nuns as less pure than monks, agrees with the general portrayal of women in Tibetan society. Woman is also conceptualized as an "inferior birth" (*kyemen*), a common

word for “woman” in Tibetan. A black stone is put at the entrance of the door when a girl is born and white stone in the case of a boy.<sup>78</sup> S. Ortner points out that the female is connected with the colour black:

femaleness, blackness, and animalness, which are essentially correlates of the impure . . . white (the color of purity). (1978b:279–280)

Visitors are not permitted to view a male child until three days after birth to avoid danger of disease or contamination, whereas two days is enough in the case of a female child.

### 6.3.7. *Women as Closer to Nature*

Some scholars, among them S. Ortner, maintain that women cross-culturally are given a secondary status because they are associated with the realm of nature. Men on the other hand are universally connected with culture. Woman is thought to be linked with nature because of her reproductive functions.<sup>79</sup> S. Ortner states:

woman's body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, “artificially,” through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables – human beings. (1975:75)

S. Rogers and others have criticized S. Ortner's theory that women are universally associated with nature. S. Rogers admits that this might be the case in some cultures, but that the paradigms woman:nature and man:culture might change over time, so there is no reason to assume, as S. Ortner does, a hierarchal valuing of the two. S. Rogers thinks that the search for universals in explaining status differences between men and women is a fallacy that obscures more than it explains.<sup>80</sup>

In Indian cultural symbology, and thus also in the Buddhist tradition, women are often associated with the realm of nature. Woman is perceived as motivated solely by emotional impulses and her prime function is seen as the bearing and rearing of children. Although these attitudes towards women can be found in the Tibetan cultural context, however, the portrayal of the Ti-



betan woman is in no way uniform. B. Miller's data on female and male personality traits also present a contradictory view, viz. men are seen as animal-like, while women in S. Ortner's terms would represent culture. Women are described as:

cool, delicate, temperate, patient, wise and forbearing [while] the nature of men is short-tempered, rude, impatient, open to violent means. (B. Miller 1980:160)

B. Aziz sets forth the following observations from Dingri in Central Tibet:

It is interesting that in general social situations much more is expected of a woman than of a man. Complementing this, women, when they are badly behaved, are subject to severe criticism – far more than a man. The male in this society may be thought to be more like an animal, easily pardoned for carelessness, for ignorance and for harsh ways. While man may lose control and be forgiven, women are not given this licence. (1978:180)

S. Ortner maintains what is popularly called the “hot stove argument,” i.e. that women are given a secondary status and associated with the realm of nature because of her functions of giving birth to, nursing, and socializing children. Most Tibetan nuns, however, are celibate and have little to do with household life. They are, like the monks, maintaining and perpetuating a religious culture, and in S. Ortner's analysis, would represent culture rather than nature.

#### 6.3.8. *The Knowledge of Nuns*

There are several passages in Buddhist texts referring to women's intellectual capabilities:

Womenfolk are uncontrolled, Ānanda. Womenfolk are envious, Ānanda. Womenfolk are greedy, Ānanda. Womenfolk are weak in wisdom, Ānanda. (in N. Falk 1980:106)

In a Mahāyāna text, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, it is stated:

All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence, is completely perfected Buddhahood attained. (J. Willis 1985: 68)

In my first encounter with Tibetans, when I told that I wanted to do research on nuns, the reaction of a young monk was:

Nuns do not know anything, they do not study religious texts or philosophy. It would be better if you study monks.

In Tibetan culture, we have seen that the opportunities for education for monks and nuns differ considerably. To legitimate these differences there are attitudes about nuns' lack of willpower to do anything but perform rituals, and preconceptions that they are by nature not suited for studying logic and religious philosophy. Higher religious education gives much prestige in Tibetan society. J. Willis maintains that in early Buddhism, nuns probably were only allowed to teach other women:

while individual nuns are praised as great teachers, they are always depicted as imparting teachings only to other women. (1985:64)

About the scholarly achievements of nuns during the time when the great Indian Buddhist universities were thriving, around the third century AD, N. Falk states:

None of the famous philosophical treatises and commentaries that made the period so illustrious are attributed to nuns. Moreover, nuns rarely appear in the brief sketches of eminent figures' lives that are found so often in the literary sources of the times. (1980:210)

Neither in the Tibetan context have women or nuns made an impact in literature or in other scholarly fields. When asking Tibetans, both ecclesiastics and lay people, about the literary production of female religious specialists, only a few of them knew of such works. A young layman expressed:

Generally people didn't care about the nuns and their writings. If they wrote something, nobody cared to study it. These are bad habits passed from generation to generation.

When asked about the reason why there were so few learned nuns in the history of Tibet, a lama stated:

The religious teachings are the same for monks and nuns. However, the nuns are content with the instruction they have already received. They don't ask for more religious teachings. Neither do they compare

the religious teachings they have received with that of other schools. The monks do more varied religious practices. If the nuns are taught meditation, they do only that, they are not very broadminded. If the present nuns practiced religion like Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche or Machig Labdron, they could become like them. If the nuns studied hard they could become lamas themselves. Because the first generations of nuns in the nunneries didn't set a good example for the following generations, the situation for the nuns today is not so good.

A young layman maintained:

In the area where I come from (Kham) the monks and nuns did not receive the same education. The nuns were not taught philosophy. This, I think, is the main reason why the nuns are lagging behind the monks. In the monasteries they teach philosophy, but as nuns and monks have to stay apart, the nuns cannot benefit from this instruction. In the nunneries they concentrate too much on rituals, and the nuns are content with that. There is no encouragement for them to study philosophy. The nuns lack the education and the diligence to practice meditation, and it is because of the inferior education that the nuns have an inferior position as compared to the monks. Only the outstanding nuns were held in high regard in society. People had no regard for the common nun, only for the monks.

A *tulku* said:

The monks study more than the nuns. It is not that nuns are not encouraged to study, but it is more their habit not to study. They don't take the initiative to study the great treatises. They feel inferior and don't have the courage to study such things. The nuns are in this respect just like the laywomen.

However, most informants agreed that monks and nuns should, at least in theory, have the same opportunities. A well-educated layman claimed:

In exile, His Holiness the Dalai Lama even gives encouragement for nuns to study.

A laywomen stated:

In our minds there is no distinction between monks and nuns. The practice of the religion is the same. No one looks down on nuns. Traditionally nuns do not have textbooks to study as do the monks, but there is no limitation by law or by custom for nuns to study. If the nuns want to study they can.

### Another laywoman maintained:

Lay people do not know exactly what the differences in the education of monks and nuns are. We think that the education is the same, but actually the monks know more. Nuns can read easily, but monks in addition know more scriptures. Nuns do more meditation, especially the older ones. The nuns in exile are learning more than they did in Tibet, even the young nuns. H.H. the Dalai lama has advised them to learn as much as they can, they should even learn philosophy. Memorizing the basic philosophical texts is very hard.

### The Three-year Retreat

In the Kagyupa School, successfully completing a three-year retreat is a necessary requirement in order to become a religious teacher. It appears, however, that monks are more readily recognized as teachers compared to nuns doing the same retreat. About the three-year retreat an old nun in Tilokpur stated:

A nun who completed the three-year retreat will still be just a nun. None of us nuns from Chedo Nunnery in Tibet did the three-year retreat while we were there. While the monks at Tshurphu did retreat in groups and were sponsored by the monastery, the nuns did retreat individually and had to pay the expenses themselves.

A young Tilokpur nun stated the following about the three-year retreat:

One striking difference is in how monks and nuns are treated after they have done a three-year retreat. Then the monk is called a lama and he has the right to teach. Even if a nun should do this retreat twelve times, she will still be just a nun. Nobody would come to her for blessings and religious teachings, unless she has proved herself to be exceptional. A nun would have to prove her ability, while this is not required of a monk.

One of the Tilokpur nuns is considered to be a very good meditator and she finished the three-year retreat in Tibet. In India she has been in retreat since 1980. When I asked her close nun companion whether she had passed on any religious teachings to her, she said:

I have not received special religious instructions from her. I suppose

she could pass on teachings since she has been in retreat for so long, but to give religious teachings, you have to have the permission of a high lama. She has not been told that she can pass on religious teachings. Until that happens she cannot teach. The monks are generally told that they can teach after the three years, but nuns are just nuns.

The prevalent conceptions among Tibetans, that nuns have little knowledge, that they do not have the diligence and will to pursue higher religious studies, and that their nature is not suited to such studies, no doubt influence the nuns in their educational ambitions. From our own society we know how cultural expectations influence girls in their choice of education and occupations. Writing about the education of Tibetans in exile, T. Dhondup states:

In particular, the girls, stifled by social pressures and conditioned from childhood to consider themselves inferior, lack educational and vocational aspirations commensurate with their potential or in comparison to their Indian or western counterparts. It must however be noted that Tibetan women in general, both in Tibet and exile, participate in life activities at par with men. It is only in relation to education and professional employment that they are staying shy. (*TR* 21,1 1986:16)<sup>81</sup>

Implicit in the statements of several of my informants is a devaluation of the abilities of nuns: “even nuns are encouraged to study philosophy,” “even laymen are asked to read religious texts, so why not nuns,” etc. However, there is also the recognition that Tibetan culture does not encourage women to study. For years people have been saying that women do not want to study logic and philosophy, but when the nuns of Geden Choeling received the opportunity to do these studies, they seized it enthusiastically. A couple of informants maintained that if nuns had the chance to study philosophy, this would give them more prestige and respect in Tibetan society. Probably the three-year retreat undertaken by several of the Tilokpur nuns will have the same effect.<sup>82</sup>

### Are Rituals Performed by Monks More Effective?

One of the main sources of income for Tibetan monasteries and nunneries are donations from lay people. Monks and nuns are requested to perform prayers, and for this they are given donations. Most of my informants maintain that it was not the custom in Tibet to ask nuns to perform ritual services in the houses of lay people. Nuns were asked to do rituals in the nunneries. A general

attitude among Tibetans is that rituals performed by monks are more efficacious and therefore monks are preferred for such services. A layman, a former monk, from eastern Tibet stated:

If there was a very outstanding nunnery in an area, lay people might offer money to the nuns for performing rituals. But even if they were outstanding, people generally requested monks to do religious ceremonies. A ritual performed by monks was thought to be more effective.

A learned lama expressed the following opinion:

In the area where I grew up (Kham), it was the custom to ask the nuns to perform rituals in the nunnery. I do not remember nuns doing rituals in lay people's houses. This is the same for the nuns in Dharamsala. In other areas in Tibet, I am sure that nuns were invited in the villages to perform ceremonies. Even lay people were invited to read religious texts, so why not nuns?

A laywoman recalled:

My own family and other villagers often invited nuns to do rituals in our homes. Also, the nuns were asked to do rituals in the nunnery. The nuns were always busy. Mostly they did Tārā rituals. Annually my family invited monks to read the Kanjur. The nuns were not invited, even though they could read. I do not know the reason for this. The monks were asked more often than the nuns to perform rituals.

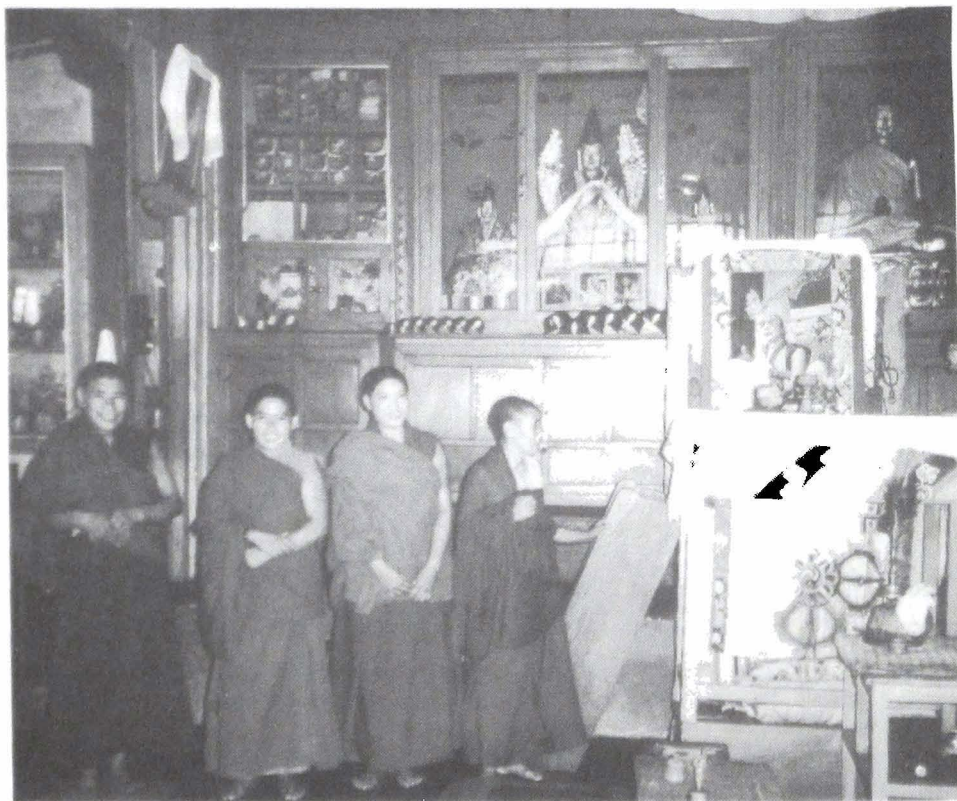
Some informants maintain, however, that there are certain prayers that are more efficacious when recited by nuns. These are prayers devoted to Tārā. One of the Tilokpur nuns maintained that lay people often think that it is better when nuns perform Tārā prayers, but she stated that from a doctrinal point of view, there is no difference whether these prayers are performed by monks or nuns. A learned *tulku*, however, expressed that personally, he thought Tārā prayers more effective when performed by nuns.

Women and nuns do seem to have a special relation to Tārā, and the prayer most often requested in Tilokpur is the 100,000 Tārā prayer. In fact, the Tilokpur nuns are well known for their conscientious and beautiful recitation of this prayer. This recitation provides the nunnery with its main income. One of the head nuns expressed that their economy is totally dependent on reque-

sts for Tārā recitations. She stated that the nuns pray that more requests will come, and in the past there has always been requests received when the nuns have been in a difficult economic situation. The nuns of Geden Choeling in Dharamsala are also known for their recitation of Tārā prayers.<sup>83</sup>

In Dharamsala lay people sometimes invite nuns from the nunnery to do Tārā rituals in their homes. Among the most conspicuous statues in the nunnery in Dharamsala are the twenty-one Tārā statues. The nun Ngawang Choezin related:

Sometimes lay people invite twelve nuns to do a special Tārā ritual, *Drolma Tshandon*. This ritual usually starts at six o'clock in the evening and lasts until five-thirty in the morning. The nuns are in two groups and they take turns doing the recitation. As far as ceremonies are concerned, nuns could also perform prayers for lay people, but people mostly invite monks. Monks and nuns do not perform prayers together in lay people's houses.



*Nuns from Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala.*

At Geden Choeling, the nuns do public Tārā rituals twice a month. A middle-aged laywoman stated:

I sometimes go to the nunnery when there is a public ceremony. Twice a month, on the tenth and the twenty-fifth of the Tibetan month, there are Tantric rituals performed in the nunnery.<sup>84</sup> A few men and women go there.

Several of the nuns have a special relation to Tārā. The nun Yeshe Drolma had a vision of Green Tārā when she was young, and a few years ago she donated a religious painting (*thangka*) of Green Tārā to a temple in Dharamsala.<sup>85</sup> One of the Tilokpur nuns has been in retreat since 1980, doing a meditation on White Tārā. According to divinations and her astrological chart, there were signs indicating that she would not live long. To prolong her life she was told by her lama to do a retreat on White Tārā. S. Beyer states that White Tārā is frequently called upon as a goddess of life and that her special function is to prolong the devotees' lives by removing their "diseases, sins, obscurations, and untimely death."<sup>86</sup> The founder of Tilokpur Nunnery, Bhikshuni Kechog Palmo, is seen, by some, as an emanation of White Tārā.

There are also indications that nuns and female religious practitioners prefer female goddesses or *dākinīs* as their meditational deity (*yidam*). One of the head nuns in Tilokpur stated:

I have not had any time yet to meditate on a *yidam*, but I will soon choose my *yidam*, and it will be a *dākinī* or Tārā. Or maybe it will be Dukhar (Sitāpatrā). She has 1000 arms, 1000 legs and 1000 eyes. Over her head is an umbrella, not an ordinary one, but an umbrella of protection.

Other informants are reluctant to state that women choose female deities as their special meditational deity. They maintain that from a doctrinal point of view, gods or goddesses do not have any special affinity to men or women. Men would just as soon choose *dākinīs* as their *yidam*. When asked about the feminine principle in *Vajrayāna*, Jetsun Kusho Chime narrated:

Women's minds are sharper than men's. Because of this practice involving feminine deities is a quicker path. In terms of an individual, male or female, it doesn't matter. You practice with your mind, not your body . . . A person in New York told me that his practice was Green Tārā, but that since his body was male, and her's female, he couldn't visualize himself as her. I told him not to worry about that. When you purify with emptiness, there is no body, not even a world. Then, out of that, you visualize. Whether you have a female or a male deity practice depends on your karma. (TVS VI, 2, 1983–84:8)



Combined with several other factors relegating nuns to a position of inferiority to monks, there is an economic aspect. The nuns are caught in a vicious circle; as they are considered inferior to the monks as concerns religious expertise and practice, they are given less donations and support from the laity. Because the nuns are poor, they cannot invite lamas to give them religious teachings that could help them accumulate learning and in this way increase their prestige.

### *6.3.9. The Self-conception of Nuns*

Implied in S. Roger's model for analysing the ideological differentiation between men and women, is the concept that there is no uniform ideology in a given society. The same point is stressed by E. Ardener.<sup>87</sup> Men and women may have different conceptualizations of their role, function, and status. It is also pertinent to remark that among the nuns themselves, there is not necessarily agreement on how they view themselves. We have discussed various cultural stereotypes and general conceptions of nuns, but it is also important to investigate how the nuns themselves conceive of their situation. We have already presented nun informants' opinions on cultural attitudes relating to women, and will in the following deal with the subject somewhat further.

#### Men as the Aggressors

In Tibetan society there is a general attitude that if monks and nuns have love affairs, the nuns are to be blamed. The nuns themselves in no way agree with this view, conversely they see themselves as the victims of the passions of men. A young nun informant stated:

As for the younger nuns, it is good for them to stay in the nunneries, because the rules that are found there help them to keep their vows. If these young nuns were roaming about freely, even if they themselves didn't want it, they would be bothered by men. Then some of them would loose their vows.

There are several examples of how solitary nuns tried to avoid being harassed by men. In the biography of the nun Jetsunla related above, we hear how she had to travel by night to avoid being disturbed by men,<sup>88</sup> and we described how nuns, when travelling

alone, have to avoid talking with men. One aspect of avoiding the company of men is that nuns want to avoid the gossip that is so readily voiced concerning their behaviour. Yeshe Tsogyal is reported to have expressed the fate of the woman in these words:

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! (in J. Willis 1984:14)

### Woman as an Inferior Being

We have discussed how Tibetan women pray to be reborn as men, and several nuns and women whom I interviewed consider a male birth as better than that of a female. One well-educated young nun maintained that there must be something wrong with women, since they everywhere have a secondary position. She felt that this treatment must be deserved, since the Buddha himself had expressed that female is an inferior birth. The most outspoken and assertive young nun in Tilokpur, however, did not agree with this view and expressed that she really wanted to reach Enlightenment in the body of a woman. While several nuns voiced negative opinions about household life, this nun felt that laywomen, because of their role in childbirth and procreation, should be entitled to a more prominent position in society.

### Humbleness

Observing the behavior of Tibetan nuns, they generally act very deferentially towards lamas and monks. In general nuns comply with social etiquette and take their seat in the back of the shrine-room in monasteries. Also I have observed nuns acting in a very shy and humble manner when Tibetan men are around. One nun who in daily life was very self-confident, partly hid her face in her shawl when talking to a Tibetan layman. A couple of times during

my stay in Tilokpur, laymen were invited to eat in the kitchen of the nunnery. The nuns who used to eat there would then delay taking their food and politely stand by the table. If a monk happened to come to Tilokpur, the nuns would instantly get up to greet him. Generally the older nuns act more humbly towards the religious authorities, while among younger nuns there is a growing awareness that they need to be more assertive.

One of the head nuns told me that their main lama, Situ Rinpoche, has claimed that the Tilokpur nuns tend to think in terms of small improvements and that they have to start "thinking big." The nuns have, for instance, plans to make small improvements in the nunnery if they can obtain the money to do so. H.E. Situ Rinpoche, on the other hand, presented to the nuns a plan for building a completely new nunnery with a new shrine-room and new rooms for the nuns. He tells the nuns that they need to be more ambitious, and that there will always be a way for finding funds for their projects.

### Capabilites

Several of the Tilokpur nuns said that they felt the differential treatment of monks and nuns to be unjust, and if the nuns had the same opportunities they would do just as well as the monks. Several Tibetans agreed with this, but added that the nuns themselves do not take any initiative. One of the oldest nuns in Tilokpur expressed the opinion that nuns should have the same chance to enter into retreat as monks, and that if nuns were qualified, they should be entitled to the same positions as monks. Both she and several of the older nuns voiced the opinion that the situation of the nuns needed to be improved.

### Do Only the Dispossessed Become Nuns?

The general conception that the nunneries are filled by unsuccessful women who cannot find a husband, is in no way shared by the nuns themselves. On several occasions I heard comments about the suffering of laywomen, and we know of several who ran away from their husbands to the nunneries. It may be that there is a higher percentage of unsuccessful women who become nuns than there are men who become monks, but until a comprehen-

sive comparative study of monasteries and nunneries is available, it is impossible to draw a definite conclusion.

### 6.3.10. *The Tibetan Nun and the Laywoman*

A question that requires further investigation is the relative status of nuns compared to that of laywomen. Tibetan laywomen seem to enjoy relatively high status, and several western scholars maintain that the Tibetan wife enjoys much liberty and equality with her husband.<sup>89</sup>

One feature that has always struck western observers of Tibetan social life is the egalitarian relationship characteristic of a Tibetan wife and a husband. (1978:180)

Also Sherpa women appear to enjoy a similarly important role. C. von Fürer-Haimendorf maintains:

A Sherpa woman appears as the equal partner of her husband not only in the privacy of the family circle but also in front of outsiders. (1964: 81)

From a Tibetan woman, R.D. Taring, we have these words:

Tibetan women have always enjoyed equal rights with men, except that no women work in government offices. Yet we are of use to the government, because by caring for the estates we leave our men free to serve the country. Especially among ordinary families, the wife has to be consulted on all matters – though it is a virtue for women to respect their husbands by getting up when the men come in from a distance, passing them their tea and so on. It is customary for the men of the house to sit above the women, though older women sit above younger men. . . . we Tibetan women are known to be very capable and have always had a most enjoyable life. (1983:186)

While the interrelations of Tibetan nuns with those of the opposite sex are carefully watched and gossiped about, as are those of monks, western scholars write that there is little stigma attached to the sexuality of Tibetan laywomen. B. Miller writes about the impression Tibetan women made in the Indian hill-stations some generations ago:

if they were not practicing prostitutes, they were appallingly promiscu-

ous. In any event, they comported themselves in a fashion that shocked the Indians, as well as the more staid Europeans. (1980:159)<sup>90</sup>

About Sherpa women, C. von Fürer-Haimendorf states:

sexual relations are emotionally not highly charged. In a society where the young people of both sexes are practically unrestricted in the pursuit of casual as well as prolonged love affairs...Sherpa husbands and wives show on the whole remarkable tolerance towards their spouses' digressions from the path of marital fidelity...illicit adventures are let off lightly and – apparently with a minimum of ill-feeling. (1964:82)

There are numerous examples in the works of western anthropologists noting the independent and powerful position of Tibetan women. Estates and other property could be inherited in the female line, and in-marrying husbands (*magpa*) in matrilineal households generally had a low status.<sup>91</sup> R.D. Taring claims that women often were considered equal with men, although they did not occupy formal public positions. She herself is an example of a very independent and powerful woman. Tibetan women were engaged in commerce, they ran restaurants, they often controlled the economy of the household, and their personal wealth. Divorce could be initiated by women as well as men, and households could be made up exclusively of close female relatives.<sup>92</sup> During winter, in the larger North Indian cities, Tibetan exile women can be observed managing small “sweater-shops.”

Some of the statements about Tibetan women given above are, however, very idealized. From previous discussions it is evident that the question of the position of woman in Tibetan society is much more complex. K. March states that the generalizations about a great deal of pre-marital sexual liberty and the lack of stigma attached to pre-marital pregnancy among Sherpas are mistaken.<sup>93</sup> Even though Tibetan women enjoy much freedom and have a relatively high status, the fact remains that a male birth is more highly thought of than that of a female.<sup>94</sup>

It is also possible that the status of women varies in different parts of Tibet. Several of my informants from eastern Tibet (Kham) stressed that men there are very highly regarded, while there is impurity connected with women. A nun maintained that people from Lhasa generally show her respect, while exile Kham-pas hardly greet her when she visits their community. I was told that the family of a nun from Kham, especially her father, very

much resented her wish to be educated. Her father was learned and wanted to educate his sons, while the girl was told she could only do household work.

Based on the available data, however, it is too early to come to a conclusion about the status of laywomen as compared with nuns. No doubt, laywomen enjoy much freedom and considerable power. However, in spite of the derogatory remarks about nuns, women taking ordination when they are young are respected in the lay community, albeit not as highly as the monks. Several informants, mainly women, maintain that the status of nuns is higher than that of laywomen. One aristocratic woman who herself had been a nun told me that she was seated above the other women in her family. Several informants stressed that whoever wears the robes of the Buddha is worthy of respect, although monks are respected a little more than nuns are. One young Tilokpur nun related:

When I visited my family in southern India, they payed me much respect. They greeted me very nicely. My aunt was very careful that nobody else should drink of my cup. I do not think that laywomen are considered as highly as nuns, then they would have to be *dākinīs*. Even though laywomen can be great *yoginīs*, it must be better to be a nun, since nuns are considered to be "pure vessels." By taking ordination and living like nuns we have purified ourselves. Also, when I walk around in Dharamsala, lay people often stand by the side of the road to let me pass, and several men take their hats off.

Nuns are respected because they wear the robes of the Buddha, because they have taken vows renouncing lay life, and because they do meritorious religious work. However, they find themselves competing with monks within the same religious structure, where most of the rules have been made to accomodate the needs of monks, and where monks have occupied all positions of importance. Nuns and their religious institutions are largely ignored. Laywomen, on the other hand, enjoy much informal power in the household where they do not compete with men, but where they have the possibility of influencing their husbands. Consequently the gap in status between a pious laywoman and a nun may not be as great as the difference between a pious layman and a monk.

## 6.4. Tantric Ideology and Women

Among the specific Tantric vows, which are generally listed as fourteen “basic downfalls,” and eight “gross transgressions,” the fourteenth of the “basic downfalls” is:

to slander women, who are the source of wisdom (S. Beyer, 1978:405)

Women chosen as consorts of important lamas are instantly recognized as *ḍākinīs*. One informant mentioned that he had seen fully ordained monks greet the wife of a *tulku* very respectfully. One nun told me that when people started gossiping that she was having an affair with her lama, several *yogins*, who formerly had ignored her, started treating her with great respect. However, such immediate fame did not occur for most *yoginīs*. Only after a long life of meditation, and after having proved their spiritual insight, were *yoginīs* respected and venerated. A Tilokpur nun expressed the following about nuns practicing as consorts:

If a nun gets married to a lama, and the marriage is approved by a higher lama, like for instance H.H. Karmapa, then the woman will be counted as a *ḍākinī* and she will be highly respected. If, however, a nun gets married to an ordinary lama, one that has just done a three-year retreat, then they will be regarded by ordinary people as breaking their vows. However, some high lamas maintain that such people may be highly realized. Personally, I wouldn't say anything bad about them, maybe it is their way of helping sentient beings.

As a *yoginī* or a female Tantric practitioner, a woman was considered the equal of man and a necessary complement to him, and in the Tantric ritual, the ordinary woman became Wisdom incarnated. Thus all women have the *ḍākinī* potential, the Wisdom potential. The view that ordinary women represent the female aspect of existence is expressed when Tibetans say that women are more intelligent than men. R.D. Taring expresses her understanding of the relation between Tantric ideology and ordinary men and women in this way:

Men do the hardest work, yet it is believed that without women nothing can be done, as they are considered more intelligent than men. The husband provides the effort and the wife the intelligence; and effort and intelligence combined provide the most fruitful results in every form of work. (1970:186)

In meditation and yoga, women are not seen as inferior compared with men. Rather, women are conceived to be better at meditation. S. Beyer states:

it is interesting to note here a peculiar Tibetan attitude toward women: Tibetans share the general Buddhist disapprobation of the moral character of women, and yet they add that a woman contemplative, if she is any good at all, is more often than not the superior of a man. (1978: 47)

Several of my informants confirmed this statement, and maintained that if a woman only could discipline herself and “get herself together” she could reach very far in meditation practice. It is significant that most of the famous female religious practitioners belong to schools of Tibetan Buddhism that stress yoga, meditation, and Tantric practices.

One may expect that Tantric ideology with its praise of the female principle would have consequences for the position of all female religious specialists and women in general. However, we have seen that the ordinary nun does not profit from this positive ideology. To make up for this discrepancy between the ideology that praises women and the actual situation for the common nun, nun informants refer to the different levels of truth perceived by “realized” and by ordinary people. This is the way one Tilokpur nun perceived how religious ideology is related to the actual situation:

The whole idea about women being inferior to men is handed down over the generations, and it is an accepted fact in Tibetan society. Few have questioned these norms. We are brought up to think that because we are women, we are inferior. However, I have often heard high lamas say that in the actual goal, there is no difference whether you are a male or a female. Guru Rinpoche himself has said that if you have enough realization, it does not matter what sex you are, what age you are, or how stupid or clever you are. In *Sūtrayāna*, which I haven't studied much, some lamas say that women are looked down upon. In *Tantrayāna*, however, it is just the opposite. The lamas tell that in *Tantrayāna* there are numerous texts full of praises of women. All women are described as *dākinīs*. While the male is the embodiment of Method, the female represents Wisdom. Therefore, discriminating women is discriminating Wisdom.

In Tibetan Buddhism different layers of ideas co-exist. Monastic Buddhism is combined with Tantric practices. Tibetan Buddhism



thus gives scope and models for different types of religious practitioners, the monastics and the Tantric adepts. While the ordinary Tibetan nun has to adjust to the monastic structure and ideology, which serves and perpetuates male talent, the Tantric path gives a more positive image of and greater possibilities for women to advance spiritually. As concerns Tibetan male religious specialists, the value system is more coherent, in that both monks and *yogins* have a very high status. For the female religious specialist, the ordinary nun has a rather low status compared to monks, while the few accomplished *yoginīs* are as highly revered as their male counterparts.

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## Changes in the Position of Tibetan Nuns in Exile

society and culture are never unitary and neatly integrated – they always represent some composite of conflicting perspectives and conflicting interests. (Roger M. Keesing, 1976:223)

The main Buddhist doctrines do not differentiate ideologically between men and women. Both monks and nuns are seen as being equally fit for the attainment of Enlightenment. The textual tradition, however, gives different views on the nature of women. Tibetan Buddhism has inherited some of the negative portrayals of the feminine from Indian culture. Women are occasionally depicted as demonic, lustful or greedy, while on the other hand, in Tantric Buddhism, women are regarded as the incarnation of Wisdom. Tibetan nuns are thus faced with an ideology that gives them contradictory signals concerning their worth.

Several Tibetan nun informants maintained that, while on the one hand women are considered inherently inferior to men, on the other, women represent Wisdom incarnate and may be identified with the *dākinī* ideal, the ideal of enlightened mind embodied in female form. Both young and old nuns in Tilokpur pointed out the discrepancy between religious ideology and the actual position of women in society. They usually attributed this inequality to attitudes in Tibetan society, attitudes that they maintained have nothing to do with religion. This lack of integration between what people think, viz. that women are the embodiment of Wisdom, and what they do, viz. relegating nuns to a position at the bottom of the religious hierarchy, constitutes a potential for social or ideological change.

P. Berger maintains that the correlation between social reality and the ideational system constitutes the plausibility structure of a given society:

Worlds are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality, both objective (as common, taken-for-granted facticity) and subjective (as facticity imposing itself on individual consciousness), depends upon specific social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question. Conversely, the interruption of these social processes threatens the (objective and subjective) reality of the worlds in question. Thus each world requires a social "base" for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This "base" may be called its plausibility structure. (1967:45)

When societies change, the plausibility structure becomes less firm, that is, the social reality and the ideational system may be found to be less in harmony. Generally, people tend to seek consistency between what they believe and what they do; either the ideological system will be altered to fit new social realities, or ideas can be the motivating factor for changing the social structure. The ambiguous ideology pertaining to women within the Tibetan context, which on the one hand attempts to legitimize the inferior position of female religious specialists, and on the other hand idealizes them on the theoretical level, gives nuns reason to ask why, if they are Wisdom incarnate, there are no religious educational facilities for them. P. Berger recognized the independent role ideational systems can have in bringing about social change:

Religious legitimations arise from human activity, but once crystallized into complexes of meaning that become part of a religious tradition they can attain a measure of autonomy as against this activity. Indeed, they may then act back upon actions in everyday life, transforming the latter, sometimes radically. (1967:42)

This autonomous role of ideologies is also stressed by C. Geertz:

culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves. (1973:93)

## 7.1. Tibetans in Exile

The exile situation has in several ways disrupted Tibetan culture, and in cultures undergoing rapid change there is often an ambivalence of values. The exile administration is trying to advocate ad-

herence to traditional norms, while at the same time trying to assimilate what is considered valuable in the host country as well as western ideas. The exile situation, together with the above-mentioned lack of integration between the ideational system and the social organization, has created great potential for changes.

In order to understand and describe social change (or maintenance for that matter), it is important to focus on the social actor. In structural-functionally oriented analyses, society has been conceptualized as an organism where social institutions are seen as functionally related. The social structure, jural rules, and moral norms, have been conceived as actual behavior, and in this analysis, the individual, who not only follows rules but also breaks them, has been dismissed. However, particularly in an analysis of the position and role of women, it is important to take an actor-oriented perspective. This is because women do not always agree with men's definitions of society and the way men see women's role in it. It is easier for anthropologists to come in contact with men in the society they study, as men are usually the most outspoken informants. Thus male definitions of woman's place are often more easily accepted. In such cases women are more likely to be seen as acted upon rather than as social actors in their own right.<sup>1</sup> P. Berger stresses the importance of an actor-oriented perspective:

The individual is not molded as a passive, inert thing. Rather, he is formed in the course of a protracted conversation (a dialectic, in the literal sense of the word) in which he is a participant. That is, the social world (with its appropriate institutions, roles, and identities) is not passively absorbed by the individual, but actively appropriated by him...the individual continues to be a co-producer of the social world, and thus of himself. No matter how small his power to change the social definitions of reality may be, he must at least continue to assent to those that form him as a person. (1967:118-19)

## 7.2. The Role of Initiators

Fredrik Barth's methodological contribution, the generative process-analysis, helps us to understand societies in change. He emphasizes the role of entrepreneurs as instigators of socio-cultural change. They are actors, often marginal in the traditional system, who manipulate ambiguous values. When several people choose

to follow new paths of action, new structural principles (rules and norms) that validate the new way of acting are created, which in turn influence the ideational system. There is thus a continual feedback process between the way people act, structural principles, and the value system. It is my suggestion that western nuns have acted as initiators, helping to bring about change in the situation of nuns in the Tibetan tradition.

### The Role of western Nuns

Among Tibetans in exile, western Buddhist women, bringing with them western feminist ideas, have instigated certain changes in the socio-cultural position of Tibetan nuns. Their feminist ideas have been effective in bringing about change precisely because of the inconsistency in the traditional Tibetan culture between the ideological portrayal of women and the actual position of Buddhist nuns. In exile, both among Tibetan nuns themselves and among religious authorities, there has been an awareness of this inconsistency and a realization that something needs to be done about it. Some of the younger generation of Tibetan nuns, who have had a general school education, and who have thus been somewhat influenced by western ideas, agree with some of the ideas of western nuns. They want to be educated, and they think it is unfair that monks come more easily than nuns to education, to financial support, and to positions within the religious hierarchy.

According to Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a woman from Hawaii who has been a nun since 1977, there were in 1984 approximately one hundred western women and about the same number of western men ordained in the Tibetan tradition. They mainly belong to the Gelugpa and the Kagyupa Schools. Some of the western monastics live in the West, connected with Buddhist centres,<sup>2</sup> while many stay in India and in Nepal. None of the western nuns stay in nunneries. Some of them have made the attempt, but find it difficult to adjust to monastic routine. One English nun stayed in Tilokpur nunnery for three years and was a nun for ten years, but eventually disrobed. A newly ordained American nun recently stayed at Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala and, perhaps because of her Japanese background, adjusted quite well, was accepted by the community, and benefitted greatly from the experience. Other western women have stayed in various nunner-

ies for short periods, but few have found it possible to thoroughly adapt to the lifestyle, the diet, and the rigorous discipline. The drop-out rate for western nuns seems to be somewhat higher than that of western monks. Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsono states that the western nuns are interested in education, and the lack of consistent study programs is one reason why they do not find the Tibetan nunneries relevant to their needs. Another factor is the lack of suitable accommodation in the overcrowded nunneries. Many of the western nuns are doing retreats, and hence prefer to live individually. Some simply prefer to be independent and do not wish to adjust to a communal living situation.

A large number of western women came to India in the sixties and seventies, and many of them were influenced by western feminist ideas. Tantric ideology gave them reason to believe that female religious specialists would have the same opportunities, recognition, and position as their male counterparts. Some western women became very frustrated when they realized the inferior position of the Tibetan Buddhist nun, and some of them have made attempts at changing the situation. Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsono, when asked about what influence she thinks western nuns have on Tibetan nuns, stated:

If western nuns behave discreetly, they can have a very positive influence. We have to understand that humility is highly valued within Tibetan society, so in order to help effect change, it is important to establish trust and then to proceed with great care and understanding. Rash and impertinent behavior, arrogance, and overt demands will only alienate people and impede progress. For one thing, disrobing is considered extremely unfortunate, indeed shameful, in Tibetan society, and the case of western nuns and monks disrobing has had a very damaging effect on their credibility and reputation, as well as their own morale. If unavoidable, it would be far better if they were to quietly go back to the West and disrobe there. But in general, I feel that western Buddhists need to reflect more carefully on the seriousness of their decision to take ordination and to realize that it is a life-long commitment. It is through serving as examples of sincere and steadfast religious practice that western nuns can most positively benefit our Tibetan sisters. I think that education is very important if the situation for Tibetan nuns is to be improved. The fact that some western nuns were brave enough to embark on the study of dialectics and philosophy has certainly encouraged the Tibetan nuns to take up these studies. Steadily and subtly, almost subversively, we can also encourage the Tibetan nuns to become more assertive and to gradually push for their rights.

Among Tibetans there are mixed attitudes about western nuns. One middle-aged Tibetan laywoman living in Dharamsala stated:

I do not have much belief in the western nuns, they change their minds very fast and disrobe. Nuns and monks practice religion to attain Buddhahood and release from the cycle of rebirths. If their minds change like the weather, then this cannot be attained. No, I do not have much belief in them.

A Tibetan nun, in her early thirties, when asked whether the western nuns have any influence on the Tibetan nuns, stated:

No, I do not think that they influence us in any way. They do not stay in the nunneries. The way that a few western nuns have behaved in India is more like a spectacle to us. Tibetan nuns are more humble and simple, we do not have the same ambitions that the western nuns have, but maybe this will change.

Another young Tibetan nun, however, stated that she felt very encouraged by western nuns, although she did not always agree with their approach. A middle-aged laywoman stated the following about western nuns:

There is a German nun who has been here for ten years, she is very good. I admire the western nuns, and I am surprised that they can learn about our religion and our language. They do fasting practices and retreat and this is admirable.

Although some Tibetans are reluctant to admit western influence on Tibetan culture, western ideas have made an impact. Many young Tibetans wish to travel to the West, for better material conditions and for western education. Several of the Tibetan Buddhist schools have established religious centres in the West, and a large number of westerners are embracing Tibetan Buddhist ideas.

The nunnery in Tilokpur was started by a western woman who was widely respected and who in several ways improved the situation for Tibetan nuns. She appointed an abbess in the nunnery and sent her to the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath for university education. It was through her efforts that this institute first began to admit women. She herself took the ordination as a *bhikṣuṇī* in Hong Kong. Several other western nuns have stayed in Tilokpur for some time, among them, Bhik-

shuni Tendzin Palmo, a very good meditation practitioner, who is very well regarded among Tibetans. The nuns in Tilokpur receive sponsorship money from the West, and a number of westerners have come to visit or to stay. An Australian couple, who are on very good terms with the nuns, stayed in Tilokpur for one year. They have found sponsors for the nuns in Australia, and Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim stated that she regarded them as “the mother and the father” of the nunnery. Bhikshuni Pema Tsultrim, one of the former head nuns, has recently stayed in Hong Kong as a translator, and she has visited several overseas Buddhist communities. One of the other former head nuns, Yeshe Palmo, is in Sweden receiving medical treatment, and she is serving as a translator at the Tibetan Buddhist Center in Stockholm.

The nuns in Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala also have connections with the West. An American woman sponsors their daily lunch. The retired chanting-master, Ngawang Choezin, who was one of the founders of the nunnery, stayed in Scandinavia for one year. Another Tibetan woman, now a nun in Geden Choeling, stayed in Canada for five years to establish a financial base. She came back to India and was ordained a nun by H.H. the Dalai Lama. She had a small house built at the nunnery and is now engaged in a three-year retreat there.<sup>3</sup> The nuns in the Dharamsala nunnery are, however, quite reserved in their dealings with westerners. Their nunnery is situated near McLeod Ganj, where the western “freak” community has settled, and their appraisal of western people in general has no doubt been strongly influenced by their contacts with this group of westerners.

Furthermore, some of the western nuns have been quite insensitive to Tibetan sentiment. Because of their aggressiveness and their open criticism of the Tibetan tradition, they have become quite unpopular among the Tibetans. A few have actually disrobed due to discouragement at the conditions for nuns or as a form of protest, but it is difficult for Tibetans to understand how some westerners’ commitment to the Dharma and to their religious vows can so easily be undone. By their indiscreet behavior, some of them have definitely discredited the cause they were committed to.

However, some innovations created by western nuns have generated newly accepted ways of behaving for nuns in the Tibetan tradition, and some of these innovations have gained sup-



port from the religious establishment. This is not to say that all changes brought about for Tibetan nuns have been started by western nuns or western Buddhists. Many Tibetans are aware of the difficult situation of the nuns, and have tried to improve conditions. However, the western nuns have made some of the problems visible. At times their methods and advocacy of change have been quite skilful, but sometimes they have acted impatiently and quite contrary to established rules and norms. What have been the changes brought about for nuns in the Tibetan tradition?

### 7.3. Changes in Exile

Concerning lay and religious education for women there have been improvements in exile. Tsering Dhondup writes:

The exiled life brought about far reaching changes in the politico-economic and social life of the Tibetan people. Where education was the privilege of the few, it became the right of all. (*TR XXI*,1 1986:15)

Although Tibetan girls tend to drop out of school earlier than the boys, both sexes can attend public schools, and they are taught the same subjects. When it comes to religious education offered by religious institutions, there have been some changes lately.

#### 7.3.1. *The Teaching of Logic and Philosophy to Nuns*

At the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, education is given in philosophy and logics. The school prepares monks for the *geshe* degree. Traditionally only monks have aimed at this type of education, and the Institute has been a monk bastion, although western lay people have been admitted. There have been two western laywomen studying here, both of whom were graduate students of American Universities and came with recommendations from their Tibetan teachers. Some years ago, one western nun was admitted to the Institute. Tibetan and western informants maintain that this was because of her assertiveness. The nun herself told me it was because she is a westerner and because she knows Tibetan.

An Australian lay student attending the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics told me that a few years ago a Tibetan nun showed up in one of their classes. She was taken aside by one of the monks,

and then she disappeared; apparently, she was asked to leave. In 1984 Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo was admitted to the Institute, and in June 1984 H.H. the Dalai Lama stated that the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics is open to everyone, regardless of sex or race. The western women admitted to the Institute of Dialectics know Tibetan quite well, and they have a much higher level of education than the ordinary Tibetan nuns. This has been cited as part of the reason why the Tibetan nun was turned away. However, the western nuns who have been admitted to the school have also been objects of gossip. Some Tibetans say that they have forced their way in.

It does not appear to have been a conscious policy to keep nuns out of the Institute of Dialectics, but for years Tibetan nuns have apparently felt uncomfortable in asserting that they are capable and worthy of undertaking such studies. In Tibet, it was the tradition to keep monks and nuns separate because of the celibacy vows. Since only monasteries had higher educational facilities, the ordinary nuns rarely became educated above the level of reading and writing. Consequently, Tibetan nuns in exile have felt a greater need for education, but they have been reluctant to seek admission at the Institute out of delusions of incapability and for fear of being considered proud in asserting their capabilities. Western nuns, on the the other hand, have not experienced educational segregation. Therefore, asking for admittance to study together with monks did not represent an innovation for them, even if in the face of Tibetan social attitudes they realized that their admission represented a radical departure from the norm.

The fact that western women have taken the initiative to study at the Institute of Dialectics brought attention to the question of religious education for women. The situation was discussed with H.H. the Dalai Lama and he saw no reason to keep women out. We thus see how western women have acted as cultural brokers and changed a structural principle, viz. the admissions policies at the Institute. As western nuns are not so bound to the indigenous Tibetan tradition, it is easier for them to act upon what they consider as unjust treatment and to feel comfortable asserting their rights.

In the future, if one or several nuns complete the education offered at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, this can stimulate other nuns to do the same. It may eventually change the cultural

stereotype that nuns are ignorant of the philosophical and literary texts, and open up new areas of endeavor for them within their religious tradition. Well-educated nuns can then teach other nuns, and this may in the future be a solution to the problem of providing the nunneries with teachers. However, it may still take time before Tibetan nuns will ask to be admitted to the Institute. This is because of cultural constraints and because they feel they lack the necessary background knowledge.

In exile there have been attempts at teaching monks and nuns together, for instance at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies at Sarnath. However, there were some problems, and several nuns, both Tibetan and western, maintain that the nuns were thrown out because one nun had sexual relations with a monk. Some young nuns thought it unjust that because a few had behaved foolishly, the whole community of nuns has to suffer the consequences.

Under the heading, "Sarnath Institute to become Co-ed" there was a note in the *Tibetan Bulletin* stating:

The Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies at Sarnath, U.P., which, since its inception, has had only male students, is to open its doors to girls from this year. A maximum of six girls will be admitted to the Institute, one of the best centres of higher learning in Buddhism. Prospective candidates (having passed at least Class VIII) can apply to the Council for Tibetan Education, along with their character certificate issued by the head of their school, before June 15, 1986. (*TB* XVII, 1 1986:11)

Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo states:

In July 1986, applications were again accepted from women, and a minimum of six nuns and/or young women were granted the right of admission to the Institute. Several dozen candidates initially expressed keen interest, but a number of untrue discouraging rumors began to circulate such as, "you have to pass a written Tibetan exam," "you have to study Hindi," "the food is terrible," etc., and some nuns were accordingly dissuaded from applying. It is common in Tibetan culture for people to seek a divination from a lama to get a prognostication before setting out on any important venture. Several potential applicants were told by a particular lama that it would not be good for them to study in Sarnath, and were thus dissuaded from applying. Two nuns who consulted a different lama were told that it would be beneficial for them to study at the Institute and this advice reinforced their enthusiasm to apply.

In view of the importance of higher education in the upward mobility of women it is incumbent upon this new group of female students to avoid any unseemly behavior in order to prevent a reoccurrence of the previous dismissal. An American male feminist pointed out to the Principal of the Tibetan Children's Village School the need for protecting the rights of the female students. Specifically, assurance should be given that if a particular student should misbehave, only that student should be dismissed and not the whole group. In other words, the actions of an individual should not be allowed to jeopardize the academic careers of others, nor be used as a pretext for discrimination against women. It remains to be seen whether this suggestion will be forwarded to the higher authorities; at this point it is quite certain that the female students would be reticent to press for their own rights.<sup>4</sup>

In this case, a western man has been acting as an initiator for improving conditions for Tibetan nuns.

To meet the growing need among nuns to be educated, while at the same time keeping training facilities separate, there have been attempts at teaching logic and debating in the nunneries. For a few years such instruction has now been given in Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala. However, the teaching of logic for nuns is not as well-organized and systematized as is the case for monks. Nevertheless, this compromise gives the nuns the necessary introduction and stimulus for further studies. In a few Gelugpa nunneries in Tibet, logic and debating were taught, so establishing such instruction in exile is not a completely novel phenomenon.

In 1985 a Rumtek monk, belonging to the Kagyupa tradition, was sent from the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala to Tilokpur to teach logic and philosophy to the nuns there. We have no information that these subjects were formerly taught to Kagyupa nuns in Tibet. One of the young Tilokpur nuns expressed that she found logic very interesting, and that she hoped that the Rumtek monk would come back to continue the instruction. Another young Tilokpur nun expressed that she would rather do meditation, as she felt that debating and logic would not get her anywhere. She maintained that debating is just fighting with words, and that a person can become very learned in philosophy without necessarily advancing spiritually.

That the Tibetan nuns are seriously lagging behind the monks in terms of education has been recognized by the Tibetan authorities. Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo maintained that in exile the Dalai Lama has showed great concern for the education of Tibetan

women and has pointed out that both the nunnery in Dharamsala and the one in Tilokpur have been somewhat neglected. He has personally visited both the Tilokpur and Dharamsala nunneries, and has on several occasions encouraged nuns to begin studying philosophy. Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche who in 1984 was the general secretary at the Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs stated:

I think the nuns should have the same opportunities as monks to study philosophy and literature. I am fighting for this, but it takes time. The inequality comes from old, bad social habits in Tibet. The general way of thinking was to belittle women. There was no encouragement for them. After 1959 there was a great change in that all boys and girls could learn the same subjects in school, and they could go on with their studies for the same length of time. But also now, somehow, the girls are always lagging behind, in schooling and in jobs. This is very disturbing, and I think this trend will last. Even if monks and nuns study philosophy together, it will still take a long time before they will be on an equal level. I think that in this generation the girls will still lag behind, and it might take two to three generations to encourage the girls to study. This is because of the prejudice in Tibetan culture.

Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche maintained that there is no government policy trying to stop nuns from attending the Institute at Sarnath, while several of the nuns that I spoke with felt that this was the case.

### *7.3.2. Nuns doing the Three-year Retreat*

Within the Kagyupa tradition there have been some improvements concerning the religious training for nuns. The chief lama of Tilokpur nunnery, H.E. Situ Rinpoche, has a reputation for encouraging nuns and trying to help them improve their situation. Bhikshuni Tendzin Palmo claimed that Situ Rinpoche is more aware of the difficult situation for nuns than many other Tibetan lamas. Under the direction of Situ Rinpoche, but through their own resourcefulness, the Tilokpur nuns have built a retreat site at Sherab Ling, Changchub Samten Ling, where a group of six Tilokpur nuns finished the three-year retreat in the beginning of 1988, and a new group of seven nuns are currently doing the three-year retreat there. It is no coincidence that measures are being taken in the Kagyupa School to improve the situation for nuns, as this school has many western followers. Many Kagyupa

centres have been established in western countries and the lamas sent to teach in them have invariably come into contact with western ideas, including feminist ones.

Several of the Tilokpur nuns seriously doubt that this long retreat will lead to any formal recognition. One young nun stated that even if nuns do this retreat twelve times, they will not be recognized as religious teachers. However, the fact that nuns in the Kagyupa tradition have the opportunity to do the retreat will increase their knowledge of meditation and yoga. The Tilokpur nuns, for instance, have a reputation for doing excellent Tārā rituals and of keeping strict discipline. If all the nuns were to do the three-year retreat this would definitely raise their prestige.

In the spring of 1984, Situ Rinpoche told the nuns that he would like to build a new nunnery in Tilokpur. Fund-raising projects towards this aim have been started. The present housing conditions for the nuns are poor and there are a large number of nuns who cannot be admitted because of lack of space. Therefore, he would like to make proper accommodations for all these nuns. The Tilokpur nuns are very grateful for the retreat at Sherab Ling, and they have taken turns going there for construction work. Improving the housing and the material conditions of the nuns are factors that would help attract more Tibetan women to the nunneries, and would counteract the image of Tibetan nunneries as neglected and unimportant religious institutions.

### 7.3.3. Ordination

Some informants maintain that the fact that only the novice ordination is available to Tibetan nuns, may be part of the reason why they are accorded an inferior position compared to the monks. Western nuns have taken the initiative to establish the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Tibetan tradition, by first receiving a transmission of the vows themselves from either the Chinese or Korean traditions. Kechog Palmo, the founder of Tilokpur nunnery, obtained the full *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in Hong Kong in 1972, and she was perhaps the first nun in the Tibetan tradition to undertake this ordination. Several western nuns have followed her example, but a few of them have subsequently disrobed. In 1984 there were some eight western *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Tibetan tradition.

Bhikshuni Kechog Palmo was encouraged by H.H. Karmapa to

take the full ordination, and today in the Kagyupa School, Tibetan and western nuns are encouraged to go to Hong Kong or Taiwan to obtain the full ordination. Until recently, the Tibetan nuns have lacked encouragement from their lamas and the economic means to go abroad for the ordination. Finally, in September 1984, Situ Rinpoche advised four nuns, Kunsang Wangmo, Wangchuk Palmo, Karma Tsultrim and Nordzum to seek the full ordination in Hong Kong. Possibly they are the first Tibetan *bhikṣuṇīs* in history. Travel expenses were provided by the members of the Hong Kong Kagyu Dharma Center. In 1988 I was informed that four other nuns from Tilokpur had received the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in Hong Kong. These are Pema Tsultrim, Karma Dechen, Norbu Sangmo, and Tsering Dokpa. It is hoped that successive groups of nuns will be able to travel to Hong Kong to receive ordination in the future.



*Nuns undertaking the bhikṣuṇī ordination in Hong Kong, 1985. In the forefront, four Tibetan nuns, possibly the first bhikṣuṇīs in the history of Tibet.*

Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo maintained that there is widespread interest in introducing the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination within the Ti-

betan tradition. H.H. the Dalai Lama stated publicly in Bodh Gaya in December 1985 that, although the full ordination for nuns is not available in the Tibetan tradition, the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage is extant in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other overseas Chinese communities, so it is possible for the Tibetan nuns to receive the transmission from that tradition. At Geden Choeling Nunnery in Dharamsala in June 1986, he also expressed interest in investigating the Vietnamese *bhikṣuṇī* lineage which belongs to the Sarvāstivāda school of *Vinaya*, the same school as that followed by the Tibetan *bhikṣus*. Before official government recognition can be given to a particular *bhikṣuṇī* lineage, several issues need to be further clarified through extensive research. These include analysis of historical documents to determine whether the lineage has been transmitted in an unbroken continuity, the validity of a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination conducted by *bhikṣus* alone, the acceptability of an ordination given by *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* belonging to different *Vinaya* schools, etc. The attitude of the Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs of the Tibetan Government in Exile is sympathetic, and a great deal of effort has been expended to pursue the matter. Still, in order to maintain credibility, and later hopefully acceptance from the Theravāda schools, it is considered judicious to investigate the matter fully and to base the decision on sound, objective scholarship.

According to the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, ten *bhikṣuṇīs*, together with ten *bhikṣus*, are required to pass on this ordination. After twelve years of ordination, *bhikṣuṇīs* are qualified to administer full ordination to female novices who have been ordained for two years.<sup>5</sup> Theoretically then, if the Chinese ordination were formally recognized by the Tibetan religious establishment, nuns within the Tibetan tradition, together with ten *bhikṣus*, could pass on the ordination in the near future. Thus the possibility exists for a *bhikṣuṇī* lineage to be established in the Tibetan tradition.

In February 1987 an International Conference on Buddhist Nuns was held in Bodh Gaya, India. The conference was open to all, regardless of gender, profession, or nationality. Nuns, Buddhist lay people, scholars, and journalists from all over the world, over one hundred registered participants, came together to pool their ideas, talents, and resources. The coordinators of the conference were Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, and Sister Ayya Khema.<sup>6</sup> One of the aims of the conference was



to show that women are ready to take an active role in the propagation of the Buddhist teachings and to apply these teachings to problems in the world. One of the aims of the conference was to strengthen the Order of nuns and to establish an International Buddhist Women's Association. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was present during the opening ceremony. He encouraged nuns to study the Dharma, and he supported the idea that women should have opportunity for full ordination and stressed the positive role nuns can play for the Buddhist Order and society in general.

Several resolutions were agreed upon during the conference and Sakyadhita, an International Association of Buddhist Women was established. The aim of this organization is to assist Buddhist women around the world. A list of sixteen goals were agreed on, among them to educate and train women as teachers in Buddhism, to introduce ordination for women where it does not exist, to encourage and improve Buddhist practice for nuns and laywomen, and to encourage research on women's role in Buddhism.<sup>7</sup>

#### 7.3.4. *Other Changes*

The Great Prayer Festival, *Monlam Chenmo*, that was celebrated each year for three weeks in Lhasa, was traditionally the exclusive dominion of monks. The celebration of *Monlam Chenmo* has been continued in exile. In 1985 nuns were allowed to participate for the first time. Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo writes:

Tibetan nuns, as well as lay women and men, have always had equal access to public teachings. There was only one event which the nuns did not attend. This was the great Prayer Festival which was inaugurated by the great Tibetan Master Tsongkhapa in the 14th century and held for 3 weeks each year in Lhasa on the anniversary of Buddha Shakyamuni's victory in the miracle competition. This prayer festival was traditionally attended only by monks and this custom was perpetuated in India after Tibet lost her independence in 1959, not due to prejudicial attitudes so much as to the inertia of tradition. This year however, when the matter was brought to the attention of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, he unhesitatingly gave permission for the nuns to attend. The news was joyfully received in Dharamsala, where over fifty nuns participated in this meritorious activity.<sup>8</sup>

Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo also mentions that in 1985 nuns were

given the right to wear the yellow robe, formerly worn only by monks, at public ceremonies:

Somehow in Tibet over the years, the practice of novices wearing the *Sanghāṭī* (patched outer yellow robe) had gradually discontinued. On March 7, 1985, however, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in a public discourse in Dharamsala, exhorted all monks and nuns to maintain exemplary standards of discipline, including the wearing of the *Sanghāṭī* robe at all ceremonies and teachings henceforth. Nuns thereby attained total equality in terms of dress. The sea of golden yellow robes at public discourses, as well as in the nearby nunnery, is most heartening. (Ibid.:20)

As several western nuns have taken the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, some, among them Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo, have been very particular about the *Vinaya* prescriptions relating to nuns. She has been actively trying to inform Tibetan nuns about particular *Vinaya* rules, and she has questioned qualified lamas and other Buddhist scholars on fine points of monastic discipline and their application in modern-day life.

When established customs change, people generally react negatively. When western nuns have made attempts to adapt the traditional robes to suit western conditions, they have met criticism. All cultures like to see their traditional garments worn properly, especially when the mode of dress has religious significance. It is not surprising that Tibetans are critical of those who wear long hair instead of shaving the head, substitute T-shirts for the vest, dispense with the required shawl, and are generally careless in their appearance. They understandably feel that such carelessness amongst western members of the Order reflects badly upon the Tibetan tradition as a whole. A case in point is the use of the yellow-faced vest by some western nuns. One Tibetan laywoman said:

It looks strange when western nuns wear the vest used by monks from the Upper Tantric College. This vest is also worn by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. They don't know.

When I discussed the matter with Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo, she stated that according to the rules, although monks and nuns have the right to wear the same vests, the use of the yellow-faced vest was in Tibet reserved for monks of Sera-je College and of the

Tantric College of Lower Lhasa. In India, the privilege was extended to the monks of Namgyal, His Holiness's personal monastery. In exile it has also become the custom for many reincarnate lamas to wear this vest. However, the members of these three monasteries are exclusively monks, and since there are not many female *tulkus* at the moment, it is obvious why Tibetans find it odd, and somewhat haughty for western nuns to dress in this style. The nuns who wear the yellow vest belong to the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition, which is based in Nepal and has centres throughout the world. They maintain that permission to wear this vest was granted to them in a private audience with H.H. the Dalai Lama, as their organization is considered a "satellite" of Sera-je College. They say that not only is it their right to wear it, but that it is a rule in their organization that they must wear it. It seems to be a classic cultural impasse created by lack of communication on both sides.

Another innovation among Tibetan nuns in exile, is a change in how to address nuns. While I was doing fieldwork among Tibetans, nuns were generally addressed with the term *ani*, and my informants considered this a polite term of address. According to Bhikshuni Lekshe Tsomo, the terms *chöla* and *tsunma* are more currently used today. She considers the term *ani* impolite as the meaning is aunt.

Although some of the western Buddhists have behaved in a manner that has shocked some Tibetans, western nuns have no doubt cleared the way and brought attention to the inferior position of the Tibetan nuns. They have initiated going abroad for the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, they have requested religious education and initiations on equal terms with monks, and they have been admitted to the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. The fact that several western nuns and some of the young Tibetan nuns are taking *bhikṣuṇī* vows and voice an interest in religious education, has generated changes on other levels. Official recognition of the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination seems to be imminent, high lamas advocate changes in the situation for nuns, and the exile government is interested in improving their religious education.

Nuns of the younger generation feel that the different treatment meted to monks and nuns is unjustifiable. They are starting to acknowledge the need for education, but lack the economic means to do anything about the situation, as well as the courage required

to press for improvements. Compared to westerners the Tibetan nuns have a different and humble way of dealing with their problems. The Tibetan nuns are in some respects following the lead of western nuns, but at the same time are sensitive to criticism and afraid of offending the “establishment.” One Tibetan nun put it this way:

The western way of thinking is quite different from ours. We cannot just decide what we want to do the way that people do in the West. The advice from our friends and our family means a lot to us. For instance, if I want to go somewhere, I will think; does my friend want to come or would she mind if I go. I will then go and ask my friend if she wants me to stay or if she wants to come.

Trying to change the situation for nuns in the Tibetan tradition is a very complicated and delicate matter that needs time and careful consideration. When there are opportunities for reform, the Tibetan nuns are eager for change, but they proceed in accordance with the sentiments in the Tibetan community rather than against them. This may be the most reasonable and prudent way to proceed when considering that a centuries-old religious tradition is suddenly being faced with numerous demands and changes. By their way of behaving a few western nuns have no doubt aroused the irritation of many Tibetans, and produced a negative attitude toward their cause, defeating their own purpose.

Thus, seeing nuns in the Tibetan tradition as actors in their own right, not only as persons who adjust to existing norms and attitudes towards nuns in particular and women in general, we obtain a diverse picture of Tibetan religious life and the situation for female religious specialists. When investigating the conditions and attitudes of the Tibetan nuns we need to take into consideration the different levels of social life, the ideology, structural forms (rules and norms), and the actual social interaction (social organization). We have seen how ideas about equality of the sexes, along with incongruity between some aspects of Buddhist ideology pertaining to women, and the inferior social position of Tibetan nuns, have been motivating factors for socio-cultural change. Both western and Tibetan nuns have been working in order to alter their situation, using different strategies, and a remarkable number of innovations have been introduced in a relatively short period of time.

Tibetans in exile have tried as far as possible to adhere to their traditions, and as such, the exile monasteries and nunneries have been crucial for maintaining their religious culture. Several monasteries have been rebuilt in exile and have retained some of their former prestige and power. However, secular education in modern India may eventually displace monastic education for young Tibetans. Organized religious education for nuns, better economic support of nunneries, and a higher degree of equality between monks and nuns are challenges that the exile administration needs to deal with if the career of nuns is to be a viable option for young exile Tibetan women in the future.

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# Notes

## Notes to Ch. 1

1. P. Pelto and G. Pelto, 1970:125.
2. T. Wylie, 1959.

## Notes to Ch. 2

1. E.B. Findly, 1985:38–42, cf. J. Auboyer, 1965:177, M. Winternitz, 1938:8–9, C. Kabilsingh, 1984:1–8, S.P. Robinson, 1985:190.
2. See the *Mānavadharmasāstra* in G. Bühler's translation, 1964:69, cf. P. Tuxen, 1944:85.
3. See P. Tuxen, 1944:5, 83–84. J. Auboyer, 1965:235–239 writes about the erotic life of young *kṣatriya* men.
4. See I.B. Horner, 1975:4–5, cf. J. Auboyer, 1965:161.
5. I.B. Horner, 1975:62.
6. D. Paul, 1979:7.
7. I.B. Horner, 1975:103.
8. For a detailed analysis of the eight rules see: I.B. Horner, 1975:118–161, cf. F. Wilson in D. Paul, 1979:85–86.
9. E. Lamotte, 1984:55.
10. *Ibid.*:55–56.
11. C. Kabilsingh, 1984:47.
12. I.B. Horner, 1975:96.
13. *Ibid.*:251–252.
14. *Ibid.*:291.
15. J. Willis, 1985:64.
16. I.B. Horner, 1975:368.
17. *Ibid.*:259.
18. *Ibid.*:280.
19. *Ibid.*:223, cf. C. Kabilsingh, 1984:74.
20. I.B. Horner, 1975:98.
21. *Ibid.*:171–172.
22. *Ibid.*:206–207.
23. *Ibid.*:180, 367.
24. J. Willis, 1985:77.
25. F. Wilson in D. Paul, 1979:79.
26. N. Schuster, 1984:41.
27. D. Paul, 1979:169, 170.

28. Ibid.:106–111.
29. Ibid.:110.
30. K. Yuichi, 1982:68, 70.
31. See ch. 6.
32. D. Paul, 1979:171–174.
33. For a discussion of the *Sumatidārikapariprcchā*, see D. Paul, 1979:178–179, 199–211, and N. Schuster, 1981:29–31.
34. D. Paul, 1979:217, 235.
35. Ibid.:230.
36. Ibid.:230.
37. Ibid.:248, 285.
38. Ibid.:250.
39. D. Paul, 1979:249–252. See also R.A. Stein, 1986:17–80.
40. R. Stein, 1972:170.
41. D. Snellgrove, 1959:23.
42. It is important to note a basic difference between *śakti* in Hindu Tantrism and the female principle in Buddhist Tantrism. In Hinduism, *śakti* is a creative and active aspect, while in Tantric Buddhism the female principle is passive. See Dale Saunders, *History of Religions*, 1 1962:303–306.
43. See ch. 6.
44. See chs. 4 and 6, see also appendix.
45. See Per Kværne, *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs: A Study of the Caryāgīti*. 1977:35.
46. See D. Snellgrove, 1959:8.
47. See ch. 4.
48. See R. Ray, 1980:241.
49. See T. Allione, 1984.
50. I.B. Horner, 1975:223.
51. Ibid.:224.
52. For a discussion of the matted hair of *yogins* and *yoginīs*, see Gananath Obeyesekere, 1981:33–40.
53. See S. Beyer, 1978, the photographs following p. 160 show several *yogins*.
54. See the story of the hardships of a *yoginī* called Ma-chig in *BA* pp. 220–222.

### Notes to Ch. 3

1. At the time of my fieldwork, this survey had not yet been published, but Tashi Tsering supplied me with the rough figures from the files. See also Bernard de Givé, 1987:267, and Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *TTJ* XII, 4 1987:87.
2. For information about Sakya nuns, see C.W. Casinelli and R. Ekvall, 1969:12, 297, 404–405.
3. *Bod-na bzhugs-pa'i rNying-ma'i dgon-deb, Record of Nyingma Monasteries in Tibet*, compiled and published by Lama Paltul Jampal Lodoe, Dalhousie (no year of publication).
4. See K. Dhondup and Tashi Tsering, *TR* XIV, 8 1979:12.
5. Lama Wangchen or Karma Thinley: *Important Events and Places in the History of Nangchen Kham and East Tibet, gangs-ljongs Mdo-stod Nang-chen rgy-*

- al-rabs dang 'brel-ba'i lo-rgyus phyongs-bsdus ya-rabs rna-rgyan*. Litograph, 1965:69.
6. The Tilokpur nun Yeshe Palmo has kindly translated a letter from the nun Khacho, dealing with religious practice and the organization in Gechag Thekchen Ling.
  7. Britt Lindhe pronounced the name of the nunnery Kaglo, while a Tibetan scholar thinks the right spelling is sGa-lo.
  8. The Tibetan term for a fully ordained nun is *gelongma*; however, I use the Sanskrit term *bhikṣuṇī*, thus indicating that the ordination is obtained from a non-Tibetan lineage. See ch. 7.
  9. Lama Lodoe, p. 56 and R.D. Taring, 1983:165.
  10. Informants pronounce the name of this nunnery Tsamgung, while scholars maintain that the correct spelling is mTshams-gur.
  11. See the survey of Nyingmapa monasteries published by Lama Lodoe.
  12. About the establishment of other nunneries, see B. Aziz, 1978:216, n16, 219.
  13. This passage was translated by Ven. Jampa Samten working at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.
  14. See also S. Ortner, 1983:101.
  15. See appendix.
  16. *shugs-gseb* means “amidst juniper.”
  17. See below.
  18. See below.
  19. See also *TN* 1985:1–2.
  20. B. Aziz, 1978:220, writes about another affiliated nunnery.
  21. mTshur-phu was one of the central monasteries of the Karma Kagyupa School, and the seat of Karmapa. This famous monastery was founded by the first Karmapa, Dus-gsum mKhyen-pa, (1110–93), see G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:36–37, 146, cf. N. Douglas and M. White, 1976:35, 37n35, (a photograph of Tshurphu is published in this work p. 38).
  22. P. Kværne, “Continuity and Change in Tibetan Monasticism”. In *Korean and Asian Religious Tradition*. Ed. Chai-shin Yu. 1977:87–88.
  23. R.A. Stein, 1972:139, cf. D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, 1980:237.
  24. See B. Aziz 1978:205, 209–210.
  25. See also Heinrich Harrer, 1982:77, and B. Aziz, 1978:79, 86, 90–92, 205, 209, 231, 233–34.
  26. B. Aziz, 1978:234–238.
  27. C.W. Casinelli and R. Ekvall have been criticized by other scholars for describing Sakya as “government” on the same terms as Lhasa.
  28. C.W. Casinelli and R. Ekvall, 1969:297.
  29. The term *ani* is also used to denote father’s brother’s wife.
  30. According to S.C. Das, the term *jomo* is also used for: “the female head of the household, a woman that governs as mistress of her own servants.” One informant claimed that the term *jomo* is also used to denote the wife of a Tantric practitioner. The Bonpo nuns at Dragkar Yungdrung Khyiltse were addressed by the term *jomo*.
  31. *tsunma* is used in the survey of nunneries and nuns made by the CRCA and by Karma Thinley when describing Gechag Thekchen Ling. Lekshe Tsomo main-



- tains that H.H. the Dalai Lama invariably used the term *tsunma* in a speech held at Geden Choeling (1986).
32. Neither of these terms were currently used during my fieldwork, but apparently the process of change, e.g. the status elevation of Tibetan nuns, has brought with it changes in terms of address. See ch. 7.
  33. B. Aziz, 1978:79n4, 205–206n5, cf. P. Kværne who likewise suggests that the term monk can be misleading in the Tibetan context, and suggests that terms like village priest or part-time priest might be more appropriate. (“Continuity and Change in Tibetan Monasticism”. 1977).
  34. Per Kværne states that in Amdo, all monks and high lamas are addressed with the term *akhu*, which means uncle, and that this term of address is considered polite.
  35. See G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:46. Children who come to the monasteries usually take lay vows until they are old enough to take the more extensive novice vows.
  36. C. Kabilsingh, 1984:47.
  37. Cf. J. Willis, 1984:19. See also Acharya Tashi Tsering and Philippa Russell, “An Account of The Buddhist Ordination of Women,” *Chö-Yang* Vol. 1 no.1. Here they maintain that there is evidence that from the twelfth century a few Tibetan lamas gave the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination to Tibetan nuns without the assistance of *bhikṣuṇīs*.
  38. See ch. 4.
  39. See ch. 4.
  40. See B. Aziz, 1976 and J. Willis, 1984:27.
  41. See appendix.
  42. See ch. 4.
  43. See ch. 4.
  44. B. Aziz, 1976:45.
  45. B. Aziz, 1978:235.
  46. As concerns offices in nunneries, see C.W. Casinelli and R. Ekvall, 1969:404–405.
  47. See C.W. Casinelli and R. Ekvall, 1969:405.
  48. L.A. Waddell, 1971:245, 275, 276, cf. R.D. Taring, 1970, K. Dhondup and Tashi Tsering, *TR* XIV, 8 1979:11–17.
  49. H. Forman 1936:183, 185.
  50. Thubten Sangye maintained that there were between seventy and eighty nuns in this nunnery.
  51. J. Willis, 1984:17.
  52. A plain shawl of maroon colour that monks and nuns wrap around their shoulders. When attending rituals in the shrine-rooms and when staying in public places, the shawl has to be worn.
  53. See below.
  54. See R.D. Taring, 1983:78, 87 and H. Harrer, 1982:76–77.
  55. See G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:38.
  56. See ch. 4.
  57. See B. Aziz, 1978:219, 246, 247.
  58. See ch. 6.
  59. See G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:38.

60. See J. Willis, 1984:17.
61. Gyatso Tshering, *TB XVI*, 1 1985:6, cf. H. Hoffman, 1975:183, T. Shakabpa, 1967:14–15.
62. Lobsang Dargyay, 1978:103.
63. Tsering Tashi: “The Bonpo Settlement at Dolanji,” *TB XVII*, 1 1986:7, cf. P. Kværne, “Continuity and Change in Tibetan Monasticism.” 1977:91–92.
64. See R.A. Stein, 1972:156–57.
65. This lama was active in the beginning of this century, and he was a friend of the Norwegian missionary Theo Sørensen, see P. Kværne, 1973:32.
66. G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:37.
67. We have information about several Tibetan women who were instrumental in arranging for copies of religious texts. Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche related that Garje Tsewang Lhamo, the queen of the king of Derge, Tenpa Tsering (1678–1738), was the main force behind finishing the Derge version of the Kanjur and the Tenjur. She also commissioned twenty-eight volumes of *Nyingma Gyubum* (*rNying-ma rGyud-'bum*) to be made. Several lamas thought she was an incarnation of Yangcen Lhamo (Sarasvati)”. See also ch. 4.
68. S.C. Das defines *chulen* as “the art of extracting essences for prolonging health and longevity, such essences are of different kinds, viz. ting-nge 'dzin gyi bcud-len the elixir of meditation; me-tog bcud-len the elixir drawn from flowers, i.e. honey; rda'u bcud-len the elixir drawn from pebbles, &c.” (1983: 394)
69. See ch. 4.
70. These passages were translated by the nun Yeshe Palmo.
71. Karma Thinley, 1965:69. This passage was translated by Ven. Jampa Samten.
72. Fasting practiced regularly by nuns includes vows of silence.
73. See ch. 4.
74. See G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:115.
75. See C. von Furer-Haimendorf, 1972:139.
76. *Ibid.*, 1972:138–139, cf. S. Ortner, 1983:102–103.
77. R.D. Taring, 1975:60.
78. See ch. 4.
79. See G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:160. See also ch. 5 below.
80. *TN*, 1985:3.
81. *TN*, 1985:3.
82. See C.W. Casinelli and R. Ekvall, 1969:297.
83. B. Aziz, 1978:206, cf. C. von Furer-Haimendorf, 1972:133–134.
84. See ch. 6.
85. *TR* 24, 2 1989:4–6.
86. *Observer*, eighteenth of December 1988, and *The Independent*, twenty-third of December 1988.
87. *TR* 24, 2 1989:5–6.

## Notes to Ch. 4

1. See J. Willis, 1984:15.
2. See M. Eliade, 1973:153.
3. Sarat Chandra Das gives a list of the most common miraculous powers in *Ti-*

- betan-English Dictionary*, Compact Edition, Kyoto, Rinsen Book Company, 1983:359–360, cf. M. Eliade, 1973:85.
4. *TR* XIV, 8 1979:12.
  5. See below.
  6. See below.
  7. See below.
  8. S.C. Das 1983:394, cf. Gyalwa Gedun Gyatso, (1475–1542), “bcud-len: Extracting the Essence,” Trans. Tsepak Rigzin, *Tibetan Medicine* No. 5. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives 1982:87–104, cf. *Taking the Essence*. Eds. Maureen O’Mally and Beth Simon. London: Wisdom Publications 1983.
  9. See below.
  10. I am not sure whether the women referred to here have taken ordination. *Ma-jo* can denote a nun as well as a consort or a Tantric practitioner. G.N. Roerich translates *ma-jo* as nun, *BA* p. 917.
  11. *BA*:917.
  12. See appendix.
  13. See ch. 3.
  14. See E. Dargyay, 1977:122.
  15. The tenth Tibetan month is considered auspicious for prayers to Guru Rinpoche or Padmasambhava.
  16. *TN* 1985:2–3.
  17. It is likely that this pilgrimage site was named after the *dākinī* Sengdongma (Simhavaktra).
  18. Sera Khandro wrote the biography of her husband (one volume) wherein some information is found about herself.
  19. Unfortunately the informant does not know the full name of Jetsunla.
  20. Probably this is the same nun as the one mentioned by Ngawang Choezin (see above).
  21. *BA* pp. 915–920.
  22. See appendix.
  23. See E. Dargyay, 1977:121–122.
  24. See above.
  25. See below.
  26. J. Willis, 1984:15.
  27. Such religious practice is a variant of the interpretation of the Tantric union conceptualized as an internal process.
  28. Tashi Tsering points out that in *Blo-gsal-bstan-skyong*, *History of Zha-lu*, Leh, 1971 pp. 165–166, there is a reference to another nun, ‘Khrul-zhig Rig’dzin Tshul-khrim bZang-mo, who likewise developed this smell (*ishul-khrims kyi dri-ma*).
  29. G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:87.
  30. For further explanation of *Chö*, see G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*. 1980:87–93.
  31. See G. Tucci, 1970:39, cf. *BA* p. 982.
  32. Her biography was written sometime between 1937 and 1949. The biography is reproduced by Sonam Topgay Kazi; *The Autobiographical Reminiscences of the Famed Religious Master and Reinbodiment of Klon-chen-pa Sug-gseb Rje-*

*btsun Rig-'dzin Chos-nid Bzan-mo*, (*gans sug ma ni lo chen rig 'dzin chos nid bzan mo'i rnam par thar pa rnam mkhyen bde dter*), reproduced from tracing of a print from the Central Tibetan blocks by Sonam Topgay Kazi, Gangtok 1975.

33. See Khetsun Sangpo, *Biographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism*, Dharamsala: LTWA, 1973 pp. 528–530, and J. Willis, 1984:21–23.
34. R.D. Taring was a follower of Jetsun Lochen. See R.D. Taring, 1983:165.
35. A hybrid of bri and ox.
36. See also L. Lhalungpa in J. Willis, 1984:22.
37. See L.A. Waddell, 1971:275–276.
38. K. Dhondup and Tashi Tsering TR XIV, 8 1979:14.
39. Ibid.:17.
40. Ibid.:17n4.
41. Ibid.:11–12.
42. Ibid.:13.
43. See D. Bärlocher, 1982:52 vol.1.
44. See also T. Shakabpa, 1967:228.
45. See L.A. Waddell referred to above.
46. H. Forman, 1936:172–186.
47. Clarke Warren: “An Interview with Jetsun Kusho: A Weaver of Dharma,” *TVS* 6, 2 1983–84:7–8.
48. Khetsun Sangpo, *Biographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism*, 1973:338–339.
49. Ani Kunga: “Karma Chokhor Dechen. A Nunnery in Sikkim, India,” *NIBWA* 5 1985:16–17.
50. “News from Karma Chokor Dechen Nunnery,” *NIBWA* 8 1986:29.
51. See Desjardins in *Le Message Des Tibetains*, Paris 1968:35.
52. R.A. Stein, 1972:98.
53. R.D. Taring, 1970:73.
54. See also TR XIX, 3 1984:14–16.
55. Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche told about another very good female religious practitioner, Tsunmo Yudron who was persecuted by the Chinese. She was not a nun, but married to the Nangchen king. She is still alive. During the Cultural Revolution the Chinese broke her back.

## Notes to Ch. 5

1. *rGya-gar Bal-yul 'Bras 'Brug khul-du 1959 phan-la chags-pa'i Bod-dgon ji-yod dang de-nas bzung byes-'byor-gyi ris-med dgon-pa gsar-bshengs ji-yod dgon so-so'i nang dge-'dun sngags-pa btsun-ma ser-khyim sogs shal-grangs ji-yod-kyi re'u-mig bshugs-so*: List of Tibetan monasteries in India, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan before 1959 and of new monasteries founded by refugees after that year, as well as of the number of monks, tantrists (*sngags-pa*), nuns (*btsun-ma*), and lay lamas (*gser-khyim*) etc, in each monastery. See also *Tibetans in Exile 1959–1980*, 1981:241–251, and Bernard de Givé, 1987:272.
2. See “Karma Chokhor Dechen. A Nunnery in Sikkim, India,” *NIBWA* 5, 1985:16–17, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “A Brief Glimpse at Tibetan Refugee

- Nunneries," *NIBWA* 10, 1987:18–22, and Bhikshuni Jampa Tsedron, "New Nunnery in Mundgod," *NIBWA* 12, 1987:21–22.
3. See ch. 3.
  4. Their ages are updated to 1989.
  5. See also S. Beyer, 1973:375–377.
  6. See chs. 3 and 6.
  7. See *TN*, 1985, Susan Woldenberg, "Tibetan Refugee Women," *TVS* 8, 5 1986:6, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *NIBWA* 10 1987:18–22, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *TTJ* 12, 4 1987:90–93.
  8. See ch. 7.
  9. After receiving the first five vows, the aspirant is supposed to have his or her head shaved and be dressed in the monastic robes which are given to her by the presiding lama. In order to save time the aspirant comes ready dressed and shaved.
  10. Krystyna Chech, who was present during the ordination, has kindly given me this information.
  11. Mahākāla is the name of a protective deity.
  12. See ch. 4.
  13. For a discussion on the organization of a Tibetan monastery, in Tibet and in exile, see P. Kværne, "Continuity and Change in Tibetan Monasticism." 1977.
  14. Lekshe Tsomo states that there were female abbesses (*mkhen-mo*) in Tibet. See *TTJ* 12, 4 1987:88.
  15. As concerns the seating during prayers in Geden Choeling, see also *TN* 1984, the photo facing p. 8.
  16. Two of the oldest Tilokpur nuns are now dead.
  17. The Tibetan titles of the different prayers: 1. *Tshig-bdun gsol-'debs*, 2. *O-rgyan sku-gsum gyi gsol-'debs*, 3. *mKhan-slob chos-gsum gyi gsol-'debs*, 4. *So-thar rgyun-'debs*, 5. *Thun-bzhi bla-ma'i rnal-'byor*, 6. *Gangs-bstan*, 7. *Zab-tig sgrol-chog*, 8. *rGyal-sras lag-len*, 9. *'Phags-bstod*, 10. *Yid-nor rnam-gnyis dbus*, 11. *Bla-ma rnams kyi zhabs-bstan*, 12. *Bod-yul bde-ba'i smon-lam*.
  18. *Bar-chad lam-sel*, *bSam-pa lhun-'grub*.
  19. *sGrol-ma*.
  20. *sMon-lam sde-lnga*.
  21. *bDe-can zhing gi smon-lam*.
  22. *gSol-ka*.
  23. The title of these prayers are: *sRi-bzlog*, *'Khor-lo*, *'Bar-ba'i sgom-bzlas*, *bDud-las*, *rNam-rgyal*, *Zhes-bya ba*, etc. *sMon-lam ye-shes*, etc. (a prayer to the Kagyupa lamas).
  24. *Sangs-rgyas sman-lha*.
  25. *dKon-mchog spyi-'dus*.
  26. *Phag-mo cho-ga*.
  27. *bsKang-gsol rgyas-pa*.
  28. *'Od-mchog*.
  29. K. March, 1979:284.
  30. See below.
  31. See also Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *TTJ* 12, 4 1987:88, and K. March, 1979:285–287.
  32. Both Hindu and Buddhists alike do pilgrimage to this temple.

33. See ch. 3.
34. See W.Y. Evans-Wentz, 1958.
35. See *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* by sGam-Po-Pa. Trans. and annotated by H.V. Guenther, Boulder: Prajna Press, 1981.
36. See above and ch. 7.
37. Karma Lekshe Tsomo writes that the last three years, nuns from Geden Choe-ling have been more actively interested in learning philosophy and logic. See *TTJ* 12, 4 1987:91–93.
38. The Tibetan Government also requested such prayers to be performed by nuns in Tibet, see ch. 3.
39. See ch. 7.

## Notes to Ch. 6

1. Claes Corlin, 1975:105.
2. Naomi Quinn, 1977:182.
3. S. Rogers, 1978:137–147.
4. S. Rogers, 1975.
5. H. Hoffmann, 1975:185–191, cf. P. Kværne, 1984:257–258.
6. R.A. Stein, 1972:98.
7. See ch. 4.
8. Cf. B.D. Miller, 1980:157.
9. See ch. 4.
10. R.D. Taring, 1983:185, see below.
11. See Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *TTJ* 12, 4 1987:88.
12. See ch. 3.
13. Basing her information on Jung-hsi Li, *Biographies of Buddhist Nuns*, Pi-ch'iu-ni-ch'uan of Pao-chang (Osaka: Tohokai, 1981), N. Shuster writes about several influential Chinese nuns who had positions as abbesses (1985:94, 95).
14. See ch. 5.
15. See ch. 4.
16. See ch. 4.
17. This definition of *tulku* is given by Kyabje Song Rinpoche in D. Bärlocher, 1982:685, vol.1.
18. See ch. 4.
19. K. Dhondup and T. Tsering, *TR* XIV, 8 1979:12.
20. D. Bärlocher, 1982:150, vol.1.
21. R.D. Taring, 1970:165.
22. See ch. 4.
23. For *rtsa-rlung* meditation, see chs. 2 and 4.
24. See G. Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*, 1980:85. The *rdzogs-chen* meditation is also very important in the Bon tradition, see S.G. Karmay, 1988.
25. L. Dargyay, 1978:105–112.
26. Gyatsho Tshering, *TB* XVI, 1 1985:6–7, cf; D. Bärlocher, 1982:633, vol.1.
27. In 1984 this religious teaching institution was called the Buddhist School of Dialectics, but has later changed name.
28. See ch. 7.

29. For education of Bonpo monks, see P. Kværne "Continuity and Change in Tibetan Monasticism," 1977, see also ch. 4.
30. See ch. 4.
31. See ch. 3.
32. P. Kværne, "Continuity and Change in Tibetan Monasticism," 1977.
33. Ibid:92.
34. See also Bernard de Givé, 1987:271.
35. Cf. Anna Grimshaw, 1983:131.
36. M. Rosaldo, 1974:17.
37. P. Berger, 1967, chs. 1 and 2.
38. I.B. Horner, 1975.
39. D. Paul 1979, see also ch. 2.
40. See below.
41. P. Berger, 1967:32.
42. See ch. 2.
43. See ch. 2.
44. G.S. Kirk, 1978:20–29, 46.
45. This version of the myth is found in *rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long*, *The Clear Mirror of the Dynasties of the Kings* by Sa-skyapa bSod-nams rGyal-mtshan, (1312–1375), see P. Kværne, 1981:42–45.
46. P. Kværne thinks that the myth has its origin around 1000 AD. The myth blends pre-Buddhist ideas (that men originated from demonic beings) with later Buddhist legitimation. The idea of descent from apes finds a parallel among the Tibeto-Burman K'iang in western China, see P. Kværne, 1981:42–45 (vol.1).
47. B. Miller's informants also expressed the opinion that the opposite characteristics were connected with men and women respectively, see below.
48. S. Ortner, 1978:180n12.
49. The stories referred to: "Uncle Tompa Sells Penises at the Nunnery" and "Uncle Tompa Becomes a Nun," are compiled and translated by Rinjing Dorje, 1975:9–24.
50. *mna'-ma* means bride, and refers specifically to a son's or grandson's wife, but the word is also used for the bride of one's younger brother.
51. Susan Woldenberg: "Tibetan Refugee Women," *TVS VIII*, 5 1986 (pp. 6–7).
52. See *NIBWA*, 11 1987.
53. Cf. *TVS VIII*, 5 1986:7.
54. See below.
55. When Tibetan proper names are printed in English publications, I generally use that spelling.
56. Although these two women have not undertaken the novice ordination, they were addressed by the term *ani*, and they were living like nuns who have been ordained as novices.
57. See ch. 5.
58. An Indian *yoginī*, Lakṣmīkara, likewise acted insane to get free from a marriage that proved to be incompatible with her Tantric practice, see R. Ray, 1980:230.
59. See ch. 4 .
60. See appendix. See also B. Aziz, 1978:245, and S. Ortner, 1983:104.

61. About the education of Tibetans in exile, see T. Dhondup, *TR XXI*, 1 1986: 15–21.
62. I.B. Horner, 1975:145.
63. See below.
64. See Ellen S. Goldberg, “Buddhist nuns make comeback in Sri Lanka – to monks’ dislike,” *The Christian Science Monitor International*, April 2, 1984: 14, 44, Kumika Uchino, “The Status Elevation Process of Soto Sect Nuns in Modern Japan,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 10, 2–3 1983:177–194.
65. I.B. Horner, 1975:121.
66. See ch. 5, cf. D. Bärlocher, 1982:185, vol.1.
67. K. March, 1979:280.
68. In early Buddhist times, too, nuns were expected to follow behind the monks. See I.B. Horner, 1975:220, 290.
69. This is a conventional way of speaking also among monks.
70. 'jig-rten bud-med ji-snyed-pa de-dag skyes-pa nyid gyur-cig in *Byang-chub Sems-dpa'i sPyod-pa la 'Jug-pa*, *Bodhisattvācaryavatāra* by Santideva, Sikkim: New Rumtek Monastery, folio 75.
71. See also B. Aziz, 1988, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *TTJ* 12, 4 1987:90.
72. Ibid:65.
73. See ch. 2.
74. See ch. 4.
75. About the concept of pollution among the Sherpas, see C. von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1972:280.
76. B. Aziz, 1978:251n.
77. Cf. E. Ardner, 1975.
78. S. Rogers, 1978:133–137.
79. See also B. Aziz, 1988.
80. See ch. 7.
81. *TN* 1984, see the text to the photo facing p. 8.
82. The nuns do Tārā prayers on these dates.
83. See appendix.
84. S. Beyer, 1979:375.
85. E. Ardener, 1975.
86. See ch. 4.
87. Cf. C. Corlin, 1975:105.
88. See also B. Aziz, 1978:179.
89. See appendix.
90. About the position of Tibetan laywomen, see B. Miller, 1980:163.
91. K. March, 1979:189.
92. B. Aziz, 1978:251.

## Notes to Ch. 7

1. E. Ardner, 1972:137.
2. The first nunnery in the Tibetan tradition has been established in the West. The nunnery, Monastère Dorjé Pamo, is situated in Toulouse, France. See Bernard de Give, 1987:276n29.
3. See *TN*, 1985:17–20.



4. Lekshe Tsomo writes that one nun from Tilokpur is currently enrolled at the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath. *TTJ* 12, 4 1987:93.
5. See C. Kabilsingh, 1984:101.
6. Sister Ayya Khema is the founder of Parappuduwa Nun's Island in Sri Lanka.
7. *NIBWA* 11, 1987:4–13.
8. Ven. Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo: "Positive Changes in the Tibetan Tradition," *NIBWA* 4 1985:20–21, cf. "Nuns Take part in Monlam," *TB* XV, 6 1985: 14.

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# Transliteration

Abima	A-'bi-ma
Akhu Thabkhe Tenpa Gyatso	A-khu Thabs-mkhas bsTan-pa rGya-mtsho (1825–1897)
Akhu Thompa	A-ku sTon-pa
Akong Rinpoche	A-kong Rin-po-che
Alakh Gongri Khandro	A-lag Gung-ri mKha'-'gro
Amdo	A-mdo
Amdzom Gar	A-'dzoms sGar
ani	a-ne
Anye Dringyal	A-myes 'Bring-rgyal
Ari	A-ris
Asog	A-sog
Ayang Rinpoche	A-yang Rin-po-che
Barkham	Bar-khams
Bodong	Bo-dong
Bodong Chogle Namgyal	Bo-dong Phyogs-las rNam-rgyal (1376–1457)
Bonpo	bon-po
Bonri	Bon-rin
Budrug	Bu-phrug
Bumo Khandro Thinley Peldron	Bu-mo mKha'-'gro 'Phrin-las dPal-sgron (b. 1865)
cham	'cham
chang	chang
Changchub Chodon	Byang-chub Chos-sgron
Changchub Samten Ling	Byang-chub bSam-gtan Gling
Changchub Tharling	Byang-chub Thar-gling
Changlung	Chang-rlung

Charu	Chags-ru
Charu Nyima Dragpa	Chags-ru Nyi-ma Grags-pa (1647–1710)
Chedo	Bye-mdo
Chenresig	sPyan-ras-gzigs
Chö	gcod
Chodon	Chos-sgron
Chökyab	Chos-skyabs
Chokyi Wangchuk	Chos-kyi dBang-phyug (1212– 1270)
chöla	chos-lags
Chöngye	'Phyongs-rgyas
Chönyi Dechen Tsomo	Chos-nyid bDe-chen mTsho-mo
Chöpa	gCod-pa
chöpön	mchod-dpon
Chosangye Rinpoche	Chos-sangs-rgyas Rin-po-che
chötrimpa	chos-khrims-pa
chöyog	mchod-gyog
chulen	bcud-len
Culican	Cu-li-can
Chusang	Chu-bzang
Damema	bDag-med-ma
Darinpu	rDza-ring Phu
Dawa Chodon	Zla-ba Chos-sgron
Dawa Choeden	Zla-ba Chos-sgron
Dawa Drolma	Zla-ba sGrol-ma
Dechen Chodon	bDe-chen Chos-sgron (b. 1942)
Dechen Wangmo	bDe-chen dBang-mo (b. 1868)
Derge	sDe-dge
Derge Ragchab	sDe-dge Rag-chab
Deshung Rinpoche	sDe-gzhung Rin-po-che
Dingri	Ding-ri
Dokho Shabdrung Khandroma	rDo-khog Zhabs-drung mKha'- 'gro-ma
Dondrup Namgyal	Don-'grub rNam-rgyal
Dorjeling	rDo-rje-gling
Dorje Nelchorma	rDo-rje rNal-'byor-ma
Dorje Phagmo	rDo-rje Phag-mo
Dragkar	Brag-dkar

Dragkar Choga Teng	Brag-dkar Chos-sga sTeng
Dragkar Tulku Lobsang Palden	Brag-dkar sPrul-sku Blo-bzang
Tendzin Nyandrag	dPal-ldan bsTan-'dzin sNyan- grags
Dragkar Yungdrung Khyiltse	Brag-dkar gYung-drung 'Khyil- rtse
Dragkhu	Brag-khug
Dragpo Dratshang	Drags-po Gra-tshang
Drepung	'Bras-spungs
Drigung	'Bri-gung
Drigung Dripon Ngawang	'Bri-gung Khrid-dpon Ngag- dbang
Drigung Khandro	'Bri-gung mKha'-'gro (d.1976)
drilbu	dril-bu
Dripon Pema Chogyal	Khrid-dpon Pad-ma Chos-rgyal (1876–1958)
Drolma	sGrol-ma
Drolma Tshandon	sGrol-ma mTshan-'don
Drolthal Gyur	sGrol-thal 'Gyur
Dronden	sGron-'ldan
Drongpa	'Brong-pa
Drongpa Med	'Brong-pa sMad
Drongpon Gyalpo	'Brong-dpon rGyal-po
Drugpa Kagyu	'Brug-pa bKa'-brgyud
Drupamo Ogyen Budri	sBrub-pa-mo O-rgyan Bu-khrid
Drupang	Gru-spang
Drupon Tendzin Phuntsog	sGrub-dpon bsTan-'dzin Phun- tshogs
Dukhar	gDugs-dkar
dungchen	dung-chen
Dungri	Dung-ris
dungso	dung-so
Dusum Khyenpa	Dus-gsum mKhyen-pa (1110– 93)
Dzalung	rDza-lung
Dzarong	rDza-rong
Dzarong Phu	rDza-rong Phu
Dzatrul Ngawang Tendzin	rDza-sprul Ngag-dbang bsTan- 'dzin Nor-bu
Norbu	'dzin Nor-bu
Dzogchen	rDzogs-chen

Gacho	dGa'-chos
Gakyi	dGa'-skyid
Galingshar Ani	dGa'-gling-shar A-ne
Galo	sGa-lo
Gamcog	sGam-lcog
Gampopa	sGam-po-pa (1079–1153)
Ganden	dGa'-ldan
Ganden Lagya	dGa'-ldan lHa-brgya
Garje	sGar-rje
Garje Khamtrul Gyurme Thin- ley Namgyal	sGar-rje Kham-sprul 'Gyur-med 'Phrin-las rNam-rgyal (1880– 1927)
Garje Khamtrul Rinpoche	sGar-rje Kham-sprul Rin-po- che
Garje Tsewang Lhamo	sGar-rje Tshe-dbang lHa-mo
Gechag Thekchen Changchub Ling	dGe-cag Theg-chen Byang-chub Gling
Gechag Tsangyang Gyatso	dGe-cag Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho
Geden Choeling	dGe'-ldan Chos-gling
Geja	dGe-rgya
gekö	dge-bskos
gelong (ma)	dge-slong (-ma)
Gelugpa	dGe-lugs-pa
gema	dge-ma
genchö	rgan-chos
genyen	dge-bsnyen
geshe	dge-bshes
Geshe Ngawang Dargye	dGe-bshes Ngag-dbang Dar- rgyas
getsul (ma)	dge-tshul (-ma)
Gojo	Go-'jo
gomchen	sgom-chen
Gongri Khandroma Konchog Rindzin Drolma	Gung-ri mKha'-'gro-ma dKon- mchog Rig-'dzin sGrol-ma (1814–1891)
gonkhang sokhen	mgon-khang gso-mkhan
Gonlung Champa Ling	dGon-lung Byams-pa Gling
Gonlung Gyabri	dGon-lung rGyab-ri
Gonpo Bernagcan	mGon-po Ber-nag-can

Gurme Palmo	'Gyur-med dPal-mo
gyaling	rgya-ling
Gyalton	rGyal-ston
Gya Nyima	rGya Nyi-ma
Hor	Hor
Hor Athubtsang	Hor A-thub-tshang
Horpo Samkha	Hor-po Sam-kha
Hortso	Hor-tsho
jalü	'ja'-lus
Jamyang	'Jam-dbyangs
Jetsun Jamyang Choje	rJe-btsun 'Jam-dbyangs Chos- rje
Jetsun Khacho Palmo	rJe-btsun mKha'-spyod dPal-mo
Jestun Kusho Luding Chime	rJe-btsun sKu-zhabs kLu-lding 'Chi-med (b. 1938)
Jetsunla	rJe-btsun-lags
Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche	rJe-btsun Lo-chen Rin-po-che
Jetsunma	rJe-btsun-ma
Jetsun Ngawang Rinchen Kun- sang	rJe-btsun Ngag-dbang Rin-chen Kun-bzang
Jetsun Pema	rJe-btsun Pad-ma
Jetsun Tamdrin	rJe-btsun rTa-mgrin
Jetsun Thinley Tsomo	rJe-btsun 'Phrin-las mTsho-mo
jomo	jo-mo
Jomo Chokyab	Jo-mo Chos-skyabs
Jomo Memo	Jo-mo sMan-mo
Kagye Silnon Lhakang	bKa'-brgyad Zil-gnon lHa- khang
Kagyupa	bKa'-brgyud-pa
Kalsang Lhamo	sKal-bzang Lha-mo
kangling	rkang-gling
Kanjur	bKa'-'gyur
Karlu Rinpoche	Kar-lu Rin-po-che
Karma Chodon	Karma Chos-sgron
Karma Chokor Dechen	Karma Chos-'khor bDe-chen
Karma Dechen	Karma bDe-chen
Karma Drubgyu Targye Ling	Karma sGrub-brgyud Dar-rgyas

Karma Hoser	Gling
Karma Kechog Palmo	Karma 'Od-zer
Karma Lekshe Tsomo	Karma mKhas-mchog dPal-mo
Karmapa	Karma Legs-bshad mTsho-mo
Karma Pakshi	Karma-pa
Karma Tsultrim	Karma Paksi
Kechog Palmo	Karma Tshul-khrims
Khacho	mKhas-mchog dPal-mo
Khacho Wangmo	mKha'-spyod
Kham	mKha'-spyod dBang-mo
Khandro Bumdzong	Khams
Khandroma Konchog Rindzin	mKha'-'gro 'Bum-rdzong
Drolma	mKha'-'gro-ma dKon-mchog
Khandro Ogyen Tsomo	Rig-'dzin sGrol-ma (1814–1891)
Khandro Peldzin	mKha'-'gro O-rgyan mTsho-mo
Khandro Rinpoche	mKha'-'gro dPal-'dzin
Khandro Tsering Paldron	mKha'-'gro Rin-po-che
	mKha'-'gro Tshe-ring dPal-
	sgron
Khardo Rindzin Chokyi Dorje	mKhar-rdo Rig-'dzin Chos-kyi
	rDo-rje (d. 1820)
Kheme	Khe-smad
khenpo	mkhan-po
Khenpo Katar	mKhan-po Ka-thar
Khenpo Khedrup	mKhan-po mKhas-grub
Khunu	Khu-nu
Khyunglung Ngulkar	Khyung-lung dNgul-mkhar
Khyung Rinpoche	Khyung Rin-po-che
Konchog Chyidu	dKon-mchog sPyi-'dus
Kongpo	rKong-po
Kundrol Dragpa	Ku-grol Grags-pa (b. 1700)
kundzob	kun-rdzob
Kunkyen Longchen Ragchampa	Kun-mkhyen Klong-chen Rab-
	'byams-pa (1308–1363)
Kunsang	Kun-bzang
Kunsang Drolma	Kun-bzang sGrol-ma
Kunsang Tse Jetsunma	Kun-bzang rTse rJe-btsun-ma
Kunsang Wangmo	Kun-bzang dBang-mo
kyemen	skye-dman

Ladrub Debai Dorje	bLa-sgrub bDe-ba'i rDo-rje
Lama Dzatrul Ngawang Ten- dzin Norbu	Bla-ma rDza-sprul Ngag-dbang bsTan-'dzin Nor-bu
Lama Gyaltshab	Bla-ma rGyal-tshab
Lama Karma Thinley	Bla-ma Karma 'Phrin-las
Lama Wangchen Norbu	Bla-ma dBang-chen Nor-bu
Lamrim Chenmo	Lam-rim Chen-mo
Lhachog	lHa-mchog
Lhadze	lHa-mdzes
Lhalung	lHa-lung
Lhoka	Lho-ka
Lhundrub	lHun-'grub
Ling Rinpoche	Gling Rin-po-che
Lobsang Dekyi Lhawang	bLo-bzang bDe-skyid lHa- dbang
Longchen	Klong-chen
Losar	Lo-gsar
Lugtse	Lug-tshe
Lumo	kLu-mo
Machig Labdron	Ma-chig Labs-sgron (1055- 1145)
magpa	mag-pa
majo	ma-jo
Marlam Nyenlag	rMar-lam sNying-lags
Marpa	Mar-pa (1012-1097)
Menri	sMan-ri
Milarepa	Mi-la-ras-pa (1040-1123)
Mindroling Tichen	sMin-grol-gling Khri-chen
Minling Lochen	sMin-gling Lo-chen (1654-1718)
Monlam Chenmo	sMon-lam Chen-mo
Monlam Sangmo	sMon-lam bZang-mo
Mon Tawang	Mon rTa-dbang
Mugtsug	sMug-tsug
Nago Dong	gNas-sgo gDong
Nagsho Driru	Nag-shod 'Bri-ru
Nagsho Tshogu	Nag-shod Tsho-dgu
namthar	rnam-thar
Namtso Chugmo	gNam-mtsho Phyug-mo



Nangchen	Nang-chen
Nangchen Tsechu	Nang-chen Tshes-bcu
Nangsa Obum	sNang-bza' 'Od-'bum
Naro Chodrug	Na-ro Chos-drug
Narog	Nag-rog
Nechungri	Ne-chung-ri
Nene Choden Sangmo	Ne-ne Chos-ldan bZang-mo
ngachen	rnga-chen
Ngawang Choezin	Ngag-dbang Chos-'dzin
Ngawang Dondup Narkyid	Ngag-dbang Don-grub sNar- skyid
Ngawang Rinchen Kunsang	Ngag-dbang Rin-chen Kun- bzang
ngodrub	dngos-grub
ngöndro	sngon-'gro
Niguma	Ni-gu-ma
Noendzum	Nor-'dzoms
Norbu Sangmo	Nor-bu bZang-mo
Nordzum	Nor-'dzoms
Nyangla Drime	Nyang-bla Dri-med
Nyarong	Nyag-rong
Nyemo	sNye-mo
Nyemo Ani	sNye-mo A-ne
Nyemoru	sNye-mo-ru
nyerpa	gnyer-pa
Nyingma Gyubum	rNying-ma rGyud-'bum
Nyingmapa	rNying-ma-pa
nyungne	bsnyung-gnas
Nyungne Karpo Chagye	bsNyung-gnas dKar-po Cha- brgyad
Nyungne Lhakang	bsNyung-gnas Lha-khang
Ogyen	O-rgyan
onpo	dbon-po
Opame	'Od-dpag-med
Padampa Sangye	Pha Dam-pa Sangs-rgyas (d. 1117)
Palchung	dPal-chung
Palmo	dPal-mo
Pawo	dPa-'bo

Pema Drodul Sangnag Lingpa	Pad-ma 'Gro-'dul gSang-sngags Gling-pa (1881–1924)
Pema Ko	Pad-ma bKod
Pema Lingpa	Pad-ma Gling-pa
Pema Sangmo	Pad-ma bZang-mo
Pema Tsultrim	Pad-ma Tshul-khrims
Pema Wangmo	Pad-ma dBang-mo
phoba	'pho-ba
Phumo	Phu-mo
Phurpa	Phur-pa
Posho	sPo-shod
Potrul Rinpoche	sPo-sprul Rin-po-che
Pushö	sPu-shod
Ra Lotsawa	Ra Lo-tsa-ba
Raya	Ra-ya
Ridzong	Ri-rdzong
rilbu	ril-bu
Rindron	Ring-sgron
Rindzin Chodon	Rig-'dzin Chos-sgron
Rindzin Nuden Dorje	Rig-'dzin Nus-ldan rDo-rje (1849–1903)
Rindzin Thinley	Rig-'dzin 'Phrin-las
ringsel	ring-bsrel
Rinpoche	Rin-po-che
rolmo	rol-mo
Rongchung	Rong-chung
Rongphu Tö	Rong-phu sTod
Sadu Tshang	Sa-'du Tshang
Sakya Khon	Sa-skya 'Khon
Sakyapa	Sa-skya-pa
Sakya Trizin	Sa-skya Khri-'dzin
Samding	bSam-lding
Samdong Rinpoche	Zam-gdong Rin-po-che
Samten Lingpa	bSam-gtan Gling-pa (b.1655)
Sangngag Lingpa	gSang-sngags Gling-pa (b. 1864)
Sangye Tendzin	Sangs-rgyas bsTan-'dzin
Semo Jamyang Chodon	Sras-mo 'Jam-dbyangs 'Chos- sgron

Semo Nordzin	Sras-mo Nor-'dzin
Sengdong Drub	Seng-gdong sGrub
Sengri Garpa	Seng-ri sGar-pa
Sera	Se-ra
Sera Khandro	Se-ra mKha'-'gro (b.1892)
serkhyim	gser-khyim
Shamar Rinpoche	Zhwa-dmar Rin-po-che
Shangpa Kagyu	Shangs-pa bKa'-brgyud
Shelkar	Shel-dkar
Shelkar Chode	Shel-dkar Chos-sde
Shelkar Sholpa Lama	Shel-dkar Shol-pa Bla-ma
Sherab Ling	Shes-rab Gling
Sherpa Rinpoche	Shar-pa Rin-po-che
Shika	Shis-ka
Shugsep	Shug-gseb
silnyen	sil-snyen
Situ Rinpoche	Si-tu Rin-po-che
sochung	gso-sbyong
Sonam Chotso	bSod-nams Chos-mtsho
Sumtog Jetsunma	gSum-tog rJe-btsun-ma
sungdü	srung-mdud
Taglung Matrul Rinpoche	sTag-lung Ma-sprul Rin-po-che
Tagsam Nuden Dorje	sTag-gsham Nus-ldan rDo-rje (b.1655)
Takra Rinpoche	sTag-brag Rin-po-che
Taphag Ani	rTa-phag A-ne
Tashi Pema	bKra-shis Pad-ma
Tashi Thongmon	bKra-shis mThong-smon
Tayu	rTa-yu
Tendru Sangmo	bsTan-'grus bZang-mo
Tendzin Chodon	bsTan-'dzin Chos-sgron
Tendzin Dzompa	bsTan-'dzin 'Dzoms-pa
Tendzin Namdak	bsTan-'dzin rNam-dag
Tendzin Palmo	bsTan-'dzin dPal-mo
Tendzin Tsomo	bsTan-'dzin mTsho-mo
Tenjur	bsTan-'gyur
Tenpa Tsering	bsTan-pa Tshe-ring (1678–1738)
terton	gter-ston

Terton Sogyel	gTer-ston bSod-rgyal (1856–1926)
Thegchog Sangmo	Theg-mchog bZang-mo
Thinley Chodon	'Phrin-las Chos-sgron (d.1969?)
Thonga Choling	mThong-dga' Chos-gling
Thonpa Chadzo	Thon-pa Phyag-mdzod
Thosam Changchub Ling	Thos-bsam Byang-chub Gling
Thubten Nordzom	Thub-bstan Nor-'dzoms
Thubten Sangye	Thub-bstan Sangs-rgyas
Thukse Rinpoche	Thugs-sras Rin-po-che
Thupten Noendzum	Thub-bstan Nor-'dzoms
Togden Gechung	rTogs-ldan dGe-'byung
Tonga Chöling	mThong-dga' Chos-gling
Tongari	sTod mNga'-ris
Topa	sTod-pa
Trakta Rinpoche	sTag-brag Rin-po-che
Trangu Rinpoche	Khra-'gu Rin-po-che
Trekhang Tsering Drolma	bKras-khang Tshe-ring sGrol-ma
Thrulsig Rindzin Tsultrim Sangmo	'Khrul-zhig Rig-'dzin Tshul-khrim bZang-mo
Tsadrul Ngawang Tendzin Norbu	rDza-sprul Ngag-dbang bsTan-'dzin Nor-bu
tsalung	rtsa-rlung
Tsamgung	mTshams-gur
Tsamgung Ani Yonten	mTshams-gur A-ne Yon-tan
Tsang	gTsang
Tsering Drolkar	Tshe-ring sGrol-dkar
Tsering Drolma	Tshe-ring sGrol-ma
Tsering Jong	Tshe-ring lJongs
Tsering Paldrön	Tshe-ring dPal-sgron
Tshecu	Tshes-bcu
Tshurphu	mTshur-phu
Tsogyal Drolma	mTsho-rgyal sGrol-ma
Tsoknyi Rinpoche	Tshogs-gnyis Rin-po-che
Tsomo	mTsho-mo
Tsongkhapa	Tsong-kha-pa
Tsopema	mTsho-pad-ma
Tsuklakang	gTsug-lag-khang
tsultrim ki drima	tsul-khrims kyi dri-ma

Tsultrim Palmo  
Tsultrim Sangmo  
tsunma  
Tsunmo Yudron  
tulku  
tummo  
Turung Ridro

Ugdron  
umtse  
U-Tsang

Wangchuk  
Wangchuk Chodon  
Wangchuk Palmo

Yage Kunsang Drolma  
Yagra  
Yangchen  
Yangchen Lhamo  
Yangpachen  
Yangtig Nagpo  
Yarlung  
Yeshe Drolma  
Yeshe Palmo  
Yeshe Tsogyal  
yidam  
Yingchuk  
Yulokgö  
Yutog Dorje Yudon

Tshul-khrims dPal-mo  
Tshul-khrims bZang-mo  
btsun-ma  
bTsun-mo gYu-sgron  
sprul-sku  
gtum-mo  
Tus-rung Ri-khrod

'Ug-sgron  
dbu-mdzad  
dBus-gTsang

dBang-phyug  
dBang-phyug Chos-sgron  
dBang-phyug dPal-mo

Yag-dge Kun-bzang sGrol-ma  
Yag-ra  
Yangs-chen  
dByang-chen lHa-mo  
Yangs-pa-can  
Yang-tig Nag-po  
Yar-klungs  
Ye-shes sGrol-ma  
Ye-shes dPal-mo  
Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal  
yi-dam  
dByings-phyug  
gYu-lo bKod  
gYu-thog rDo-rje gYu-sgron

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## Appendix

### The Biography of the Nun Yeshe Drolma (Ye-shes sGrol-ma)

The nun Yeshe Drolma is known by Tibetans in Dharamsala to be a very good meditation practitioner. In fact she is called *gomchen* (*sgom-chen*) which means great meditator. Tashi Tsering arranged for me two meetings with her, which each time lasted for several hours. Yeshe Drolma had agreed to tell me the story of her life and this is how she herself wanted to tell about her life and religious practice. I am greatly indebted to Tashi Tsering for the translation of this interview.

The time I spent with the nun Yeshe Drolma made a great impression on me. We visited her in the end of December 1983, and there was a very good atmosphere in her small room (about two by three meters). In her room there was a bed, a kerosene stove, and a beautiful altar, with all the necessary ritual objects and pictures of Bodhisattvas, *dākinīs*, and lamas that have been important to her. Yeshe Drolma constantly offered us Tibetan tea, biscuits, and sweets. She all the time kept saying that her story was not worth recording, that she was only one religious practitioner among several others. She kept stating that she has not been doing any great things in her life.

“I was born in 1908, in the Tibetan Earth Ape Year, at Sangshung Shodrug (gSang-gzhung Shog-drug) north of Lhasa. The nomad tribe my family belonged to was called Surug (Su-rug). Surug is the name of one of the six nomad tribes of Sangshung. My father’s name was Tender (bsTan-dar) and my mother was named Karmo (dKar-mo). We were nine children in our family and I was the youngest.

Our family was well-to-do and we were very religious people. Constantly there were three monks employed to recite *sūtras* and *tantras* in our home. One of these monks was called Nelchorma (rNal-'byor-ma) and during his employment he read Milarepa’s



*Yeshe Drolma, or Ani Gomchen, in the Nyungne Lhakang in Dharamsala.*

biography, the hundred thousand songs of Milarepa, and the text *Thardo* (*Thar-mdo*) one hundred times each year. He also recited the twenty-one Tārā prayer seventeen hundred thousand times. Since he was always reciting, he never had time to talk. When I was young, very few women in the northern region of Tibet learnt reading and writing. I was lucky to have Nelchorma as my first teacher, and thus it was he who opened for me the door to spiritual life.

Many lamas were invited to our home. I only remember the names of the most important ones, which were: Taglung Shabdrung Rinpoche (sTag-lung Zhabs-drung Rin-po-che), Matrul Rinpoche (Ma-sprul Rin-po-che), and Tsetrul Rinpoche (rTse-sprul Rin-po-che). I was too young at the time to understand their religious teachings, but I received initiations from them all. Matrul Rinpoche gave me the name Yeshe Lhatso (Ye-shes lHa-mtsho).

My parents took me to Lhasa twice, when I was nine and when I was thirteen years old. After returning from Lhasa the second time, I did a pilgrimage, circumambulating Namtso (gNam-mtsho), a lake north of Lhasa. Back at home I did an offering-prayer (*skyabs-'gro*). I recited *mani mantras* one hundred thousand times and I started doing morning prostrations, one hundred at the time. This I have done every morning since.

When I was about thirteen years old, I started going to the meadows and pray to the Buddhas in the four directions. I asked that I may live a spiritual life and not the life of a laywoman. I feared this as I saw that my elder sisters were being sent off in marriage to different tribes. Suitors had already asked me to marry, but I refused. They did not ask me because I was particularly pretty, but because I came from a wealthy family, and my father was well known in the area. My brothers and sisters were having successful marriages, and thus they thought me to be a desirable partner. My family asked the suitors to wait until I was twenty years old, as they thought that I would have changed my mind by then.

When I was fifteen years old, I did one hundred and thirteen circumambulations of Tshpag Lhakang (Tshe-dpag lHa-khang) in Lhasa. Two years later, I did one thousand seven hundred prostrations while circumambulating three stupas called Taglung Kubum (sTag-lung sKu-'bum) in Taglung Monastery, north of Lhasa.



When I was seventeen years old, my mother died (1924). My father now decided to do a retreat for three years. When the three years were up, he started another retreat called sealed-door retreat (*sbug-sgo 'dag-sbyar*). Each day he did four sessions (*thun*) of meditation and prayer. He stayed in the retreat for twelve years, and died in the cave during a fourth meditation session. He was reciting *Vajra Guru Mantra* of Padmasambhava, and before he died a small new tooth grew in his mouth.<sup>1</sup>

There was another outstanding religious person in my family who inspired me much. This was my younger uncle. He was sent to his inlaw's house, and his wife's family made him work very hard. They did not give him any free time for religious practices. During work he used to recite *mani mantras*. He had a pocket hanging around his neck, and when he had finished one hundred *mantras*, he put a pebble in the pocket. Then, in the evening, in candlelight or in the shade of the moon, he counted the pebbles and changed them into beads. Thus he was able to count the *mantras* he recited, and in this way he counted one hundred million *mani mantras*. As time passed he was given more rights in the household, and he could do his prayer and visualization sessions without being interrupted. Altogether he recited six hundred million *mani mantras*.

One of my elder sisters had been a nun from when she was eight years old. Her name was Peldzom Drolma (dPal-'dzoms sGrol-ma). She, together with a friend, meditated in Tongshong Phugpa (sTong-gshongs Phug-pa), a cave near Phumdo (Phu-mdo). They were followers of the Kaygu tradition and their teacher was Gangshar Rinpoche (Gang-shar Rin-po-che). In 1925, partly to avoid being married, I joined my sister Peldzom Drolma, a nun called Sangmo Chodon (bZang-mo Chos-sgron), and her mother on a long pilgrimage to Mnt. Kailash (gNas-ri Ti-se).

On the way we visited many holy places, such as Tashilunpo (bKra-shis lHun-po) Monastery, Sakya (Sa-skya) Monastery, Dingri (Ding-ri) Monastery, and Shelkar (Shel-dkar) Monastery. In Mustang we visited pilgrimage sites such as Sala Mabar (Sa-la Ma-'bar), Dola Mebar (rDo-la Me-'bar), and Chumi Gyatsa (Chu-mig brGya-rtsa). On our trip we also went to Purang (sPu-rang) and saw the images Khorchag Jowo ('Khor-chags Jo-bo) and Namkha Khyungdzong (Nam-mkha' Khyung-rdzong). Here I met the famous Lama Degyel Rinpoche (bDe-rgyal Rin-poche). Now I

undertook my first haircutting ceremony, and Degyel Rinpoche looked in the scriptures he was reading and gave me the name Drolma Yangchen (sGrol-ma dByangs-can). I received religious teachings from Lama Degyel, but I do not remember which.

Our pilgrimage lasted for one year and three or four months. During all this time we did not waste one day, we were always receiving religious teachings from lamas or visiting holy places. I do not remember the names of all the sacred sites, but we visited them all in the western region of Tibet. I came back to my tribe in 1926, then nineteen years old. The spiritual master of my father, Potrul Rinpoche Karma Yinpa Dargye (sPo-sprul Rin-po-che Karma sByin-pa Dar-rgyas) from Dzigar Monastery ('Dzi-sgar) in Kham, told me that he had done the same pilgrimage, and that it was equal to seven preliminary practices (*sngon-'gro*).

In order to obtain religious teachings from Potrul Rinpoche, I did the preliminary practice called *Chagchen Ngöndro* (*Phyagchen sNgon-'gro*). This religious practice consists of one hundred thousand prostrations, one hundred thousand prayers of refuge (*skyabs-'gro*), reciting the hundred letters or *mantras* (*yig-brgya*) one hundred thousand times, then one hundred thousand *maṅḍal*, and finally Guru prayers (*Bla-ma'i rNal-byor*) one hundred thousand times.

In the following years I continued doing my religious practice as before. In 1928 I went to Lhasa and twice circumambulated the Lingkor (Gling-bskor), and I did one circumambulation with prostrations around the Bamyé (Bams-yas), the Radre (Ra-sgred), and Drigung Thil ('Bri-gung Thil). Three times I went on pilgrimage to Bumri Barkor (dBum-ri Bar-bskor). When I was twenty-three years old (1930), I was ordained a novice (*dge-tshul-ma*) by Potrul Rinpoche (sPo-sprul Rin-po-che), and given the name Tsultrim Palmo (Tshul-khrims dPal-mo).

My father's guru, Potrul Rinpoche, had been to many pilgrimage places all over Tibet and received religious instructions from different teachers. He was destined to have a monastery somewhere, and he had looked all over Tibet for a proper place. While staying with our tribe, he found the place he had been searching for. He reported this to the Thirteenth Dalai lama, who shared his aspirations and allowed him to found a monastery. The monastery's name Thosam Changchub Ling (Thos-bsam Byang-chub Gling) was given by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The monastery

was situated in the south of Surug, and it was of the Drugpa Kagyu School ('Brug-pa bKa'-brgyud).

At that time (1935–36) Kunsang and I decided to build a hermitage. Kunsang came from a poor family and was a distant relative of mine. Our families supported us during our building project, and our brothers helped us with the work. The hermitage was to be a sub-branch of Thosam Changchub Ling and it was situated c. twenty minutes' walk north of the monastery. The hermitage was generally known by the name of Dragkhu (Brag-khug). At first we had only three rooms, but the hermitage expanded as we were joined by eighteen to twenty more nuns. In the daytime we went to the main monastery for religious teachings and came back to our hermitage after dark.

From 1935 to 1958 Kunsang and I stayed most of the time at Dragkhu. Sometimes during these twenty-two years of hermit life, my family sent a horse for me so that I could come and visit them. This usually happened during the summer. Otherwise, I spent my time at Dragkhu. Some of the winters I followed my nephew Changchen Khentrul Rinpoche (lCang-can mKhan-sprul Rin-poche) to Drigung Monastery. At Drigung I stayed for some time to receive religious teachings and to visit pilgrimage sites.

In Drigung there is a place called Tshaphug (Tsha-phug) and here I obtained religious teachings on Tārā from Lama Dorje Lhokar (rDo-rje Lho-dkar). In Terdrom (gTer-sgrom) I received the initiation of Vajrakila (*Ye-shes mTsho-rgyal gyi Phur-pa'i bKa'-dbang*), and Nyentshe (*bsNyen-tshad*). I recited the seed-syllables of *phurpa* one hundred thousand times. I also recited one hundred thousand seed-syllable *mantras* (*phur-pa*) to Vajrakila. In Dringung Thil (Thil) I did ten periods of fasting (*bsnyung-gnas*), each period lasting for twenty days. Then I received initiations from a nun called Nene Choden Sangmo (Ne-ne Chos-ldan bZang-mo), a very accomplished religious practitioner, who left her footprint on solid rock. She was born near Drigung at a place called Drupang (Gru-spang). Her root-guru was Drigung Dripon Ngawang Rinpoche ('Bri-gung Khrid-dpon Ngag-dbang Rin-poche). At another time, I met Shugsep Lochen Rinpoche, who was another highly accomplished religious practitioner.

Later, I received precepts (*lung*), initiation (*dbang*), and instructions (*khrid*) from the text *Rinchen Terdzo* (*Rin-chen gTer-mdzod*) from Lama Dsigar Kongtrul ('Dzi-sgar Kong-sprul). In

order to obtain the above-mentioned instructions, I had to do certain practices like the *Jetsun Ngöndro* (*rJe-btsun sNgon-'gro*). Furthermore, I promised to meditate in an absolutely dark room. This meditation is called *Muntsham* of *Yangti Nagpo* (*Mun-mtshams* of *Yang-tig Nag-po*), and I did this for one month. The instruction was given by Lama Ngawang Rindzin (Ngag-dbang Rig-'dzin) in his hermitage called Langdong Osel Ling (gLang-gdong 'Od-gsal Gling). It was a sealed-door retreat, and there was a small window through which the teacher every day gave instructions on how to proceed with the meditation.

Fifteen or twenty days after this retreat, on the fifteenth of the fourth Tibetan month 1950, my friend, the nun Kunsang, Lama Ngawang, and I went on a pilgrimage to Bata (*rBa-rta*). Our teacher said that if we did one circumambulation of Bata in one day, it would be equal to one circumambulation of the holy place Tsari (*rTsa-ri*) in southern Tibet. Bata had been blessed by Machig Labdron and Yeshe Tsogyal. My father's spiritual teacher Karma Yinpa Dargye had left his footprint on a rock there.

We were told by our lama to bring all the articles for offering (*tshogs-rdzas* and *gser-skyems*). Early in the morning, we set out on the journey. Ngawang Rinpoche told us that the day was auspicious (*rten-'brel*), and we therefore requested him to do some miraculous deeds. We thought he might want to do a miracle since he had asked us to bring all the objects for offering. Lama Ngawang did not answer our request, he was simply smiling.

After some time we reached a big plain, where in the distance we could see the hills of Bata. From the hills a big hail and thunderstorm was coming towards us. Since we had not brought any shelter or raincoats, we asked our lama to stop the storm. He told us to recite this prayer:

While crossing the forests and isolated country of Bayul  
 No matter the way was beclouded and impeded  
 It is doubtless that Ogyen, the earth-lords  
 And his retinue of guardians lead us  
 On the way in the right direction.  
 I offer my salutation to Ogyen Padmasambhava.

Lama Ngawang himself went a short distance ahead of us, put a shawl (*sku-gzan*) on his head and started praying. Then we noticed that the hailstorm changed direction and went away from us.

We thanked our teacher and told him that he really had done a miraculous deed. He was simply smiling, not acknowledging whether he had stopped the storm or not.

We went on with the journey and we crossed a pass called Shela (Shel-la) at the place Tsaza (Tsa-za). Before reaching the valley on the other side, we came to a place called Menlung Dzongnag Sumdo (sMan-lung rDzong-nag Sum-mdo). There was a temporary nomad camp here, made by one of the wealthiest families in the area. The name of the family was Kokhen Tshang (rKok-mkhan Tshang). The Rinpoche knew these nomads since he had grown up in the same area as them. The nomads welcomed us and brought us yougurth and fuel. The Rinpoche was invited to their tents, and we went to a beautiful spot by a stream nearby. We starting making lunch, my friend prepared the tea, and I started making offering cakes. Kunsang made an offering of the first tea, and then she poured us each a cup.

We were getting worried because Lama Ngawang had not come back, and we looked to the sky to check the time. There, in the sky we saw numerous rainbows moving around, like clouds before a storm. The sky was full of these rainbows, moving very fast in a criss-crossing way. Slowly the rainbows turned into the shape of a red coloured triangle (*chos-'byung*). I asked my friend what all this was, and Kunsang looked up. We were both amazed and forgot completely about our tea.

Then, on the red triangle the form of Guru Padmasambhava took shape. The image covered the upper part of the valley. Anyone could have seen this huge form of Padmasambhava, but it was difficult to make out the details of his face. We were feeling very blissful and happy and we could hardly think clearly. Kunsang suddenly remembered the short sevenfold recitation *Tshigdun Soldeb* (*Tshig-bdun gSol-'debs*), which we both prayed.

Again the five-coloured rainbows started moving, and the form dissolved. Then the clouds slowly became green and formed into a lotus on which the form of Tārā sat. Her left leg was crossed and her right hand was pointing downwards. Her left hand was holding a lily and her right leg was stretched. The image was much smaller than that of Guru Padmasambhava, but it was more clear. The image was made up of clouds and rainbows in space, but it was very near to us. Tārā was laughing, rejoicing. We were both dazed and we recited the prayers and seed-syllables of Tārā.

Slowly the rainbows and the clouds started moving again and Tārā's face turned red. She was slowly fading away, but she was still smiling at us. Thereafter, the sky turned very chaotic, the rainbows again criss-crossing. Then everything was lit up, the nomad tents and their sheep were illuminated.

Rinpoche, together with a servant from the nomad camp, came slowly towards us. We were overwhelmed by happiness and wanted to tell our teacher about the miracle, but because of the servant we decided to wait. Lama Ngawang told us to start the offerings (*bsangs* and *tshogs*). We went to the fire but discovered that it had died out. Our tea was cold and the butter hard. Thus the miracle must have lasted for some time, but we did not know how long. The servant lit the fire with his matchlock and we started the ceremony. Afterwards, we offered many items to the servant and he was quite happy.

Finally we told Rinpoche about our experiences and exclaimed that we had never been so happy before. It was a happiness beyond words. The lama asked if we both had seen the images (or the *bltad-mo*). We told him one by one what we had witnessed, and he revealed that the display had been created by him. Rinpoche told us that we were both virtuous (*las-dag-pa*) since non-virtuous people do not see such things. He told us not to cling to what we had experienced. He himself had not seen the display.

We returned to the hermitage very late and when we arrived Lama Ngawang's mother and nephew were asleep. The mother woke up, and said she had been looking for us in the direction of Bata just before sunset. I asked her if she had seen any rainbows in that direction, but she had not. We thought this was strange, because to us it looked like the whole sky was full of them. Some time before our small pilgrimage, Rinpoche had ordered a new Green Tārā *thanka* to be painted for him. We had thought this *thanka* very impressive, but after our vision of Tārā, the *thanka* looked pale, as if it had faded.

The reason why we saw this display in the sky must have been because of my friends and not because of myself. Since then, I have never seen anything like this, so the appearance could not have been created on my behalf. When I was young I used to have many good spiritual dreams, but now I do not have them anymore. Maybe this is because I do not practice religion as much as I ought to.

While staying in our hermitage, I received religious instructions from Domang Tulku Kunsang Thegchog Dorje (mDo-mang sPrul-sku Kun-bzang Theg-mchog rDo-rje), from Detrul Pema le Rabtsel (sDe-sprul Pad-ma Las Rab-rtsal), and from Potrul Rinpoche (sPo-sprul Rin-poche). I received *Zhi-khro'i bKa' dBang* three times and instructions on the Manual of Hermits (*Chags-med Richos*). Kunsang and I did an abridged *ngöndro* written by Dzapel Trul Rinpoche (rDza-dpal sPrul Rinpoche). This religious teaching was given by our teacher, Lama Detrul Pema. Further, we recited one hundred seed-syllables of Tārā, and practiced the teachings that we had been given before by lamas. From Domang Tulku Kunsang Thegchog Dorje, I received the following teachings of the *Terser (gTer-gser)* cycle such as: *Lama Gongdu (Bla-ma dGongs-'dus)*, *Khandro Gongdu (Kha-'gro dGongs-'dus)*, and *Yidam Gongdu (Yid-dam dGongs-'dus)*. From Lama Detrul Pema le Rabtsel, Lama Dzikor Kongtrul ('Dzi-'sgor Kong-sprul), and Lama Ngawang Rindzin (Ngag-dbang Rig-'dzin) I received instructions on how to train the mind (*sems-khrid*), from Lama Potrul Rinpoche, I received *Drubpa Kagye kyi Wang (sGrub-pa bKa'-brgyad kyi dBang)*, and from Lama Drigung Rukhen Trul Rinpoche ('Bri-gung Ru-mkhan sPrul Rin-po-che) I received the initiation of Chenresig five times. During our twenty-two years in the hermitage, we annually did eighteen days of fasting, and we never failed in this.

One of our teachers, Potrul Rinpoche, died in 1944. His incarnation was found and installed in Thosam Changchub Ling. In 1959, when he was thirteen years old, he was arrested by the Chinese and he spent eight years in prison. He is now living as a layman in Lhasa, but he is still a Rinpoche. His name, Karma Shedrub Chokyi Nyima (Kar-ma bShad-sgrub Chos-kyi Nyi-ma), was given to him by Gyalwa Karmapa (1924–1981), but these days he uses his lay name Sonam Dondrub (bSod-nams Don-grub).

We were eight nuns from the hermitage who started our escape from the Chinese in 1958. We took the northern route to India, and on the way we visited various famous sacred places. Among them was Sangsang Lhadrag Karpo (Zangs-Zangs lHa-brag dKarpo) where there is a cave of Yeshe Tsogyal. Here we performed rituals. Before reaching Nepal we went to four pilgrimage-sites of Milarepa: Dragkar Taso (Brag-dkar rTa-so), Uma Dzong (dBu-ma rDzong), Kyangphen Namkha Dzong (rKyang-'phen Nam-

mkha rDzong), and Ragma Changchub Dzong (Rag-ma Byang-chub rDzong). It took us two years to reach Nepal and there we visited Bodh-Nath, Swayambhu, the Asura Cave, Yangle Shod (Yang-le Shod), and the place where Buddha offered his body to the tigress.

Of the eight nuns from Dragkhu Hermitage, who escaped to India, only the youngest one and myself are alive today. This other nun disrobed and is presently living in Nepal. She recently went back to Tibet. Our hermitage has been totally destroyed, and only the throne is there today. Also, Thosam Changchub Ling Monastery has been destroyed. Only the flowers are still there.

In 1961 (the Bull year) I reached Dharamsala, but stayed here only one and a half month. The Tibetan Government sent me and one hundred refugee families to Manali. That year I went with my relatives on pilgrimage to Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, Rajgiri, and to the ruins of Nalanda. From Manali I also travelled to Lahul, Spiti, to holy places called Re Phagpa (Ras 'Phags-pa), Phagmo Drilbu Ri (Phag-mo Dril-bu Ri), and Gandola. I also visited Kar-dang (sKar-dang) and Tayu (rTa-yu) Monasteries, and Biling ('Bi-ling) Retreat-centre. In Lahul and Spiti there is a famous statue of Milarepa owned by the wealthy Khangsar (Khang-gsar) family. I went to see this very auspicious statue, of which it is said that its hair grows.

From Manali I moved to Dalhousie. Here a nunnery was established in Ashoka cottage. The abbot of the nunnery at that time was Karma Thinley, or as he is also called, Lama Wangchen Norbu (Bla-ma dBang-chen Nor-bu). When staying here my memory was failing. Karma Thinley told me to recite the seed-syllable of Mañjuśrī and Arapaca (A-ra-pa-tsa) seven hundred thousand times. After that I recovered.

Later on the nunnery, which now was inhabited by forty nuns, was moved to Gita Cottage. I was now fifty-eight years old and I started a two hundred days fasting (equals one hundred sessions of fasting). After one hundred and forty days I fell ill and was hospitalized. Now I received help from the British nun Freda Bedi or Kechog Palmo. After the stay in the hospital, I started another two hundred days fasting and in addition I did a sixteen days fasting to make up for the two hundred days that I broke when I was hospitalized. During my stay in Dalhousie, I received many initiations, empowerments, religious teachings, and precepts from Karma Thinley and from Karlu Rinpoche.



The nunnery was moved to Tilokpur in 1968 and I stayed here for one month. Thereafter I moved back to Dharamsala and settled in Forsyth Ganj. I did one hundred days fasting and following that a two hundred days fasting in the Nyungne Lhakang (bsNyung-gnas Lha-khang). When the fasting ended a thanksgiving (*gtang-rag*) was given in the house of the benefactor Ama Drolma (A-ma sGrol-ma). Ama Drolma then offered me a room in the same house (as the Nyungne Lhakang), and this is where I now live.

From 1970 to 1973 I did a three-year retreat in my room. During this retreat I also finished reciting the *Vajra Guru Mantra* one hundred thousand times. This was started in 1950 when Kunsang and I had the vision of Padmasambhava. We were then told by our teacher to recite this *mantra* every day until we eventually reached one hundred thousand. During the retreat I received the initiations of *Sangba Dupa* (gSang-ba 'Dus-pa), *Demchog Jigche* (bDe-mchog 'Jigs-byed) and *Nalchorma* (rNal-'byor-ma) from H.H. the Dalai Lama, his late senior and junior tutors, Ling Rinpoche, and Triyang Rinpoche (Khri-byang Rin-po-che). Every morning together with three monks I did *Nyenpa* (bsNyen-pa) in the Nyungne Lhakang. We finished one hundred thousand *Nyenpa* of Vajrayoginī. This religious practice we did during the daytime, and in the evening I went back to my room. After we had finished, a *Chinsek* (sByin-bsreg) ritual was held.

Then for three months, the mother of the Tibetan doctor, Lob-sang Drolma (bLo-bzang sGrol-ma) and I did the *Nyenpa* of Vajrayoginī four hundred thousand times. Afterwards, I did a *Chinsek* ritual. Then I helped an old Tibetan lady, Yangchenla (dByangs-can lags) to do a Vajrayoginī *Nyenpa* in the Nyungne Lhakang. We did one hundred thousand. Yangchenla is now living in Switzerland.

In the Tsuklakang in MacLeod Ganj, I received a transmission (*lung*) of the whole Kanjur from the abbot of Sera Monastery, and it lasted for nine months. Later, I received a transmission of the whole Kanjur from Pangnang Rinpoche (sPang-nang Rin-po-che). I received a transmission of the collected works of Tsongkhapa (Tsong-kha-pa) and his two disciples Gyal Tshabje (rGyal Tsha-brje), and Madrubje (Mags-grub rJe). Also, I received transmission of some volumes of Tenjur.

Since I settled in my house in MacLeod Ganj, I have partici-

pated every year in a one to four days fasting in the ninth Tibetan month and a two days fasting in the tenth Tibetan month. Every winter I go into retreat of *Opadme kyi Tshedrub* ('*O-dpag-med kyi Tshe-sgrub*) for two months. This year I have not been able to do so because my legs are in such a bad shape.”

1. According to Tibetan belief, when a religious practitioner recites *mani mantras* or other seed syllables of deities one hundred thousand times, they get a new tooth called *dungso* (*dung-so*).