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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Yeshe’s Tibetan Pilgrimage and the Founding of a Himalayan Nunnery

Kim Gutschow

The three heroines of our story first came to a solitary cliff to build their meditation cells nearly six decades ago, before the Buddhist principality of Zanskar was a part of the nation we now know as India. One by one, nuns came to piece their tiny meditation cells out of rocks and mud mortar, laboriously hauled to the site basket by basket. In the mid-1950s, three of the founding nuns traveled several thousand kilometers to be ordained as novices by the venerable Ganden Throne Holder in Tibet. Before they went to Tibet, Yeshe and her companions were no more than celibate spinsters living on a cliff. After their ordination, they founded a full-fledged nunnery in Karsha village, one of the oldest and most prominent villages in Zangskar. Karsha proudly hosts ancient temples dating back to the 11th century and ruins dating back even earlier, yet it appears never to have hosted a nunnery. How could a group of women achieve in this century what others had failed during the previous millennium? We shall examine how ordination can spark both individual and collective transformation, just as it transformed the inner and outer landscape of one Himalayan Buddhist community.

Life’s what you see in people’s eyes. Life’s what they learn, and having learnt it, never, though they seek to hide it, cease to be aware of ... The lines around Yeshe’s piercing eyes indicate the tremendous determination which has enabled her to weather countless hardships in her lifetime. Like most nuns in Zangskar, Yeshe first learned to read and memorize Buddhist texts with relatives at monastic institutions. In Yeshe’s case, these apprenticeships were of two different sects, which do not operate exclusively in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition but may share initiations and revere the same teachers. After spending several winters at the 18th-century Drugpa Kagyu (’Brug pa bka’ rgyud) temple in Sani village, Yeshe moved to a Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) nunnery called Dorje Dzong, supposedly founded by a disciple of the 15th-century Tibetan saint, Tsongkhapa. In order to be closer to home, Yeshe returned to a site steeped in antiquity in her natal village of Karsha. She moved in with her childhood friend Angmo, the first nun to build a retreat cell near an 11th-century temple high above Karsha village. Unlike Angmo, who had been orphaned as a child and had built her cell laboriously without assistance from any family members, Yeshe received generous help from her father and mother when it came time to build her cell. Yeshe still recalls how her parents held “begging beers” in Karsha to solicit the beams for her cell and how her relatives volunteered their services as carpenters and masons.

Yeshe, Angmo, and a third nun, Deskhyid, spent their first years on the cliff memorizing the Guru Puja (bLa ma mchod pa) and the Vajra Offering (rDo rje gebad pa). At this time, they lived mostly at home as “lay nuns” with five precepts — not to kill, steal, lie, commit sexual misconduct, or take intoxicants. They were not qualified to wear monastic robes, for they lacked ordination, which was a rare privilege for Zangskari women in those days. After receiving ritual instruction from an elderly monk at Karsha monastery, they decided to join him on a pilgrimage to Tibet in 1956. It was to be a turning point in their lives.

Setting out on foot, Ani Yeshe and her companions traveled some 5,000 km to Tibet, a distant and fabled place of learning and spirituality they had never seen. The first challenge was gathering provisions for the lengthy journey. They each packed a few pounds of butter and nearly 60 lb. of flour, fearing they would be unable to carry much more. They begged relatives for money and pulled together whatever savings they had: Yeshe collected 500 rupees, Angmo had 300 rupees, but poor Deskhyid raised only 250 rupees. In late November, they set off with seven other Zangskari villagers, heading south over the 16,400 ft. Shingo La pass. After walking 400 km to the neighboring region of Lahaul, they took the first bus ride of their lives. In Delhi, they caught a train that took them clear across northern India to Kalimpong. They begged for food and free spots on the train, and eventually made their way to Gangtok. In Sikkim, they split into smaller groups for the last leg of their journey on foot. Crossing the Himalayan ranges into Tibet in late December, they faced a freezing wind beyond Phari village. All of them suffered severe frostbite, which bothers them to this day. Along the way, they slept in the courtyards of Tibetan farmhouses and begged for flour or butter. After several weeks, they reached Tashilhunpo Monastery, where they rejoiced in a reunion with the Zangskari monks. For the first time in months, they ate their fill and could chat freely in their local dialect. After recuperating for several days and visiting the resplendent monastic halls, they set off once more for Lhasa.

They reached Lhasa in time to see the 14th Dalai Lama preside over the annual Great Prayer Festival during the Tibetan New Year. Afterward, they were ordained as novices (dge tshul mna), the highest ordination available to women in Tibet at that time. They received the 36 novice precepts from the Gaden Throne Holder (dGa’ ldan khri pa), who held the throne built for
Tsongkapa, the 15th-century founder of both Ganden Monastery and Lhasa’s Prayer Festival. They could not have guessed that 40 years later they would be among the last Zangskari novices ordained in Tibet by this venerable teacher.

After being ordained as novices, nuns are expected to abide by the same 36 precepts and wear the same robes as novice monks (dge tshul). The day of ordination is the first time they may wear the three sacred robes (vest, lower robe, and yellow outer robe) which signal their new androgynous state. Novices of both sexes are expected to wear their robes until the day they die, for the robes are deeply invested with symbolic import. Representing poverty, chastity, and purity, they symbolize the Buddha’s teachings and the path of renunciation that was his main legacy. The robes are fashioned out of pieces of cloth sewn in such a way as to recall the scraps of cloth the Buddha and his disciples collected from cremation grounds. Imbued with an aura of sanctity, they are worn in a ritually prescribed manner that Yeshe and her companions learned only years later. Yeshe recalls how she rarely wore the robes at all in the first years after her ordination, because she simply did not know how to tie them! Eventually, a kindly monk taught her the required number of folds and the rules that apply to wearing the robes. The upper garments must never touch the lower extremities of the body. Just as one avoids stepping over food, religious books, and other sacred objects, one is forbidden to step over the robes. Yet the robes alone cannot sustain a novice nun. Renunciation also requires practice and learning to retreat from the daily demands of worldly life.

Initial Hardships of Spiritual Practice

When the newly ordained novice nuns returned home in late spring of 1957, after crossing many mountain passes and the teeming north Indian plains, they were pulled back into the routine work of agrarian life. After working most days on their family farms in the village, they fastened back up to their cells each night to recapture the warm bonds of their nine-month pilgrimage. As their new-found spiritual companionship at the nunnery grew stronger, they decided to devote the next winter to religious austerities.

Working double shifts during the harvest season, they earned enough grain in wages to stockpile for a lengthy period of meditative seclusion. As the snow began to fall, they repaired their stone cells on the cliff which had been largely neglected during their absence. While the villagers let loose with revelry and feasting, turning the ordinary world upside down in their customary New Year (lo gser) celebrations during the winter solstice, the nuns retired to their cells to perform the preliminary practices (sngon ‘gro). A certain degree of stamina is required to complete the required 111,111 repetitions of these practices in sub-zero winter temperatures. The nuns took solace and warmth from each other as they repeated their prayers of refuge (skyangs ’gro), full-length prostrations (phraya chen mo), mandala offerings (dkyil ’khor), and the prayer of generation (btag skyed). Although laypeople occasionally complete these practices late in life when they have fewer household obligations, monastics perform them in their youth.

Yeshe described the full-length prostrations to me by leaping off her cushion, throwing her full body along the floor, and sliding her hands until her arms were fully extended above her head. As she pushed herself back up on her knees, she grimaced and joked that she was getting too old for this sort of thing. Pointing to her elbows, palms, and knees, she recalled the blood that had stained her freshly plastered floor as she did prostrations years ago. She described her sensations as if they had occurred just yesterday, noting, “Although I felt pain at first, after a while I didn’t even feel the bleeding sores anymore.” Unlike Tibetan pilgrims, who often wear leather aprons, or wooden blocks on their forearms, Yeshe wore no protective pads during her repeated slides along the floor. The preliminary practices are a training in the arts of mindfulness and awareness. The hypnotic effect of the repeated physical rigors and prayers create the conditions for single-pointed concentration and a gradual emptying of the mind. The practices force the practitioner to focus on her body and breath, while ignoring her pain, exhaustion, and the daily distractions of village life.

Yeshe’s reminiscences were not intended as exaggerated bravado, but rather as poignant reminders of time spent training herself in the art of detachment. Self-inflicted pain may help mask the wrenching pain of separation as novices psychologically, if not physically, detach themselves from the mundane sphere of village life. Although they may continue to participate in their family’s domestic life, nuns learn to rise above the mundane desires and dreams shared by their village sisters. Nuns take up a shadow life on the cliff above that involves more intense physical deprivation than that ordinarily experienced by village women. After their winter meditations, Yeshe and her companions emerged from their cells with much more than scars on their palms and knees. They had found a sustaining vision for their spiritual life and for the community of nuns that would slowly follow them to the nunnery atop the cliff over the next decades.

Daily Praxis and The Art of Detachment

After taking ordination, Yeshe’s religious rituals became merged with her mundane daily life. As a novice, she is required to adhere to the bodhisattva vow: to maintain an awakened mind (sangs skyed) attuned to compassion at all times. The vow demands a profound altruism that places the welfare of
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others before one's own at every moment. Yeshe knows how difficult it is to practice perfect generosity. Rather than trying to live up to an unattainable ideal of infinite compassion, she makes a vow to take up the pain of those less fortunate than herself through a practice known as gton gten (“sending and receiving”):

May the suffering of all those who are hungry come to me. May all of my happiness go to them. May those without clothes receive from those who have clothes. Just as we now drink tea and eat bread, we think, “May all those without food also receive food.” If I go hungry, it is okay. If I have no clothes and am cold, it is no problem.9

Like most nuns, Yeshe performs her daily ritual recitations almost unthinkingly while cooking tea or carrying water. Yet these recitations should not be confused with secular rituals like brushing one’s teeth. As symbolic or aesthetic acts, the recitations express a profound shift in the way the world is perceived. Non-attachment is far more than a philosophical principle; it is lived bodily praxis. Even a simple act such as going to sleep may be infused with profound meditative import. Every night after dinner, as Yeshe completes her evening prayers and visualizations, she mixes the last sip of tea in her cup with a pinch of barley flour. The dough cleans out the butter left in her cup and serves as a bedtime snack. She then turns her cup upside down, for in Zangskari idiom an empty cup invites a host to fill it. When Yeshe places her cup face down every night, it signals that she might not arise the next morning to break her fast:

By next morning, if I open my eyes, it is by the mercy of the Three Jewels and my root teacher that I have not died, that I am not sick, that I have a sound body. Will my consciousness return tomorrow morning or not? Will I rise again tomorrow morning or not? If I die, it is by the mercy of the Precious Buddha. If we die, it is all right for us old ones.10

With this contemplation, Yeshe – 73 years old in 1999 – tucks herself in and sleeps soundly one more night. By preparing herself emotionally for death every evening, she infuses her days with meditative awareness. Her evening ritual expresses the credo of Tsongkhapa’s Great Exposition of the Stages to the Path of Enlightenment (Lam rin chen mo). In this text, the practitioner is urged to meditate upon the inevitability and possible immediacy of death as a reminder of why merit-making is the most urgent task in this lifetime.11 Although Yeshe has never read the text, she has heard oral commentary on it from both Ladakhi and Tibetan monks who tour Zangskar in the summer to give teachings. Yeshe also prays every evening to Maitreya and Samanabhadrā, to remind herself of the impermanent, conditioned, and interdependent nature of all things.12 She tries to maintain a state of mental clarity in which only good thoughts (kun slong bzang po) arise.

Yeshe’s Tibetan Pilgrimage and the Founding of a Himalayan Nunnery

To say “perfectly pure thoughts” means good thoughts, white thoughts. We do not send others evil thoughts or black thoughts. “Perfectly cleansed thoughts” means we generate only the “bodhisattva mind,” a straight mind which doesn’t wish harm upon others, doesn’t feel jealous, doesn’t feel anger and pride, and doesn’t covet another’s wealth. And in Buddhism, we imagine all sentient beings of the six realms to be our father or mother, and say, “May they be reborn in the Buddha fields.”13

Yeshe explains that suffering is inescapable within the six realms of existence. In the hells one feels the sufferings of heat and cold; in the hungry ghost realm, hunger and thirst; in the animal realm, the suffering of carrying heavy burdens; even in the god realm, one suffers because pleasures cannot last. Yeshe admits that she does not know whether she will be blessed with another human rebirth, but nonetheless she prays fervently to be reborn as a monk. To explain why she feels it is fortunate to be born as a human, Yeshe told me a parable from a Buddhist sūtra:

Imagine the entire world covered with a stormy ocean. Deep in this vast ocean, long before the continents emerged, there was a single tortoise who only surfaced once every hundred years for air. Along with the tortoise, there was one other object in this ocean: a wooden yoke, like one puts on a yak. The probability of the tortoise surfacing and putting its neck through the yoke is greater than the probability of our attaining a human rebirth in our next lifetime.

Given that human rebirth is so rare, it would be a shame not to study Buddhism in this lifetime.

Many Zangskari nuns dedicate themselves to the practice of tantra, an advanced path which offers a shortcut to esoteric truths that might take lifetimes to learn by the study of the sūtras. Yeshe and the other nuns at Karsha practice the Vajrayogini Tantra, an advanced tantric text.14 After receiving a Vajrayogini empowerment, a nun dedicates herself to meditative austerities and a daily regimen of prayers and prostrations. Tantric practice demands intensive motivation and discipline, because it offers a shortcut on the path to awakening. The daily practices of most Karsha nuns include an evening meditation (rDo rje rnal ’byor ma’i bdag skyped) in which the practitioner generates and dissolves an image of her protective deity (yi dam), Vajrayogini. The same deity is called forth twice a month in a special ritual in the monastic assembly. On this occasion, all those who have not completed the obligatory meditation retreat (such as the ethnographer and the younger nuns) are required to leave the assembly.

All but one of the Karsha nuns have completed the solitary three-month retreat of Vajrayogini. In this concentrated set of visualizations and recitation, the practitioner focuses on, and eventually becomes, the
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Geshe Lobzang Zodpa and Vajrayogini Practice

When Geshe Lobzang Zodpa came to Zangskar in 1972, he gave a series of initiations including Tsongkhapa’s Great Exposition of the Path (Lam rim chen mo) and a Kalachakra initiation (dus ‘khor dbang chen). In the tradition of scholars from centuries past, the Geshe also wrote a short history of religious establishments in Zangskar while residing at Karsha monastery. His teachings were so powerful that four women renounced lay life and took the five precepts, while the older nuns were ordained as novices (dge tshul ma) under the Geshe’s tutelage. In the summer of 1973, the Geshe gave the Profound Teachings of Vajrayogini (rDo rje nyal ’byor ma’i zab khris) to a select group of nuns and monks in Karsha. The Vajrayogini empowerment is an esoteric rite transmitted orally only to serious initiates who commit themselves to certain precepts and meditations. While only a few monks participated, all of the nuns from Karsha did. As a result of this initiation, the Karsha nuns found both a spiritual practice and their root teacher (rtsa ba’i bla ma).

After holding the week-long Vajrayogini empowerment at the monks’ monastery, the Geshe crossed the Karsha gorge to visit the cluster of nuns’ cells on the opposite cliff. When he saw the nuns diligently performing their humble practices in the dark, windowless temple with its ancient paintings and crumbling walls, he was deeply moved. The nuns told him how they prepared their tea and meals on a makeshift outdoor hearth, despite blizzards and hailstorms in the winter. They spoke about the difficulty of gathering in a temple they could not call their own, where they were never certain to have access. In response, the Geshe suggested it was time to build a new assembly hall. The nuns spent the next decade converting this vision into reality. While the construction was driven by powerful and persevering women, the catalysts and engineers were men. Before he left Zangskar in 1975, the Geshe urged the nuns to begin collecting rocks from the surrounding hillside. Although the Geshe did not return until two years later, the nuns never gave up their dream of an assembly hall on the site he had selected.

The nuns worked as menial laborers on the site for the next ten years. For two summers, they gathered stones from the surrounding cliff, conveniently littered with the remnants of Karsha’s earliest settlement, which dates back to well before the tenth century. In the summer of 1978, when the nuns held the ritual to open the earth (sa’i cho ga), the entire congregation of nuns and most senior monks of Karsha monastery were present. After they performed the ritual to mollify local spirits of the earth (sa bdag, ge’bi bdag), the foundation of the new assembly hall was laid. The construction proceeded slowly, since silt and water had to be hauled from the stream bed far below the clifftop. A monk from Karsha proved indispensable as construction manager, for he bought construction supplies.

Ordination as Collective Transformation: Founding Karsha Nunnery

Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.

For Yeshe and her companions pilgrimage and ordination marked a shift in personal status and served as a catalyst for the collective development of the nunnery. Although they left home as simple renunciants, Yeshe and her companions returned from Tibet as novices with an extraordinary blessing. Their ordination under the third highest Gelugpa hierarch in Tibet (after the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama) gave them a certain clout and courage in the eyes of their immediate community. In one pilgrimage, they had seen more of the world than most of their relatives would see in a lifetime. On their return, the three nuns had the audacious dream of expanding their community of nuns in the direct shadow of the powerful monastery which had dominated Karsha for centuries.

For nearly two decades, a tiny community of nuns struggled with limited economic resources to found a ritual program. As Yeshe and her companions completed their preliminary practices, they incorporated the abstract truths of impermanence into a bodily habitus of self-denial. And as they visualized the vast, interdependent emptiness of which they were a part, they began to think in broader terms than ordinary village women. To build an assembly hall on the cliff, the nuns needed both a powerful patron and widespread support from the community. Not a single stone in the village could be moved without permission from the village leaders. The nuns were only able to accomplish this remarkable feat due to the initiative and intervention of a charismatic Ladakhi monk who came to live at Karsha monastery.
(central beams, glass, wood for framing the windows and doors) from the neighboring district capital of Kargil. He called masons and carpenters from Karsha village, and well-known artisans from the distant monastery of Lingshed. With his initial loan, the nuns began to build, and as the walls took shape, they began to solicit contributions for the work in progress. In gratitude for his assistance, the nuns spun his wool for two winters and helped build him a house in the village. One might say they inadvertently wove this monk into their female company, for he abandoned his monastic robes thereafter. First he married a woman in Karsha and settled into the house the nuns helped build. Later he took a second wife, an ex-nun who left the order to tend his house and sheep in a neighboring village.24

After four years of hard labor, the nuns had exhausted their supplies as well as the generosity of villagers who worked largely without pay. Although some of the beams had been donated from neighboring villages, thanks to Geshe Zodpa's solicitations, most had been bought on credit.25 When funds ran out, several nuns traveled on foot throughout Zangskar and Ladakh to beg for donations. Three nuns who went to the upper Indus valley in Ladakh recall the difficulties they faced, far from kin networks and the natural generosity of their region. Sometimes they were turned away from houses with angry insults and only a cup of roasted barley flour (ritsam pa) for their efforts. Since the Ladakhi villagers appeared to have little respect for nuns, they were often refused beds and had to sleep in courtyards under the stars. After several winters of soliciting donations, the nuns sold the barley flour they had earned and returned to Zangskar with a lighter and more useful commodity: cash. Meanwhile other Karsha nuns had been soliciting donations up and down the three major river valleys of Zangskar: Stod, Lungnag, and Sham. At a total cost of nearly 30,000 rupees, the completed nunnery complex included an assembly hall, guest room for visiting dignitaries, winter and summer kitchens, assorted storage rooms, and a bathroom. After 15 years of labor, the wall murals in the assembly hall were painted in the summer of 1990.26 The finished monastic complex, known as the Land of Oral Accomplishments and Propitiation (bKa’ spyod sgrub gling), stands as testimony to the perseverance of the remarkable Karsha nuns.

Evolution of the Ritual Calendar at Karsha Nunnery
After their ordination in Tibet, the founding nuns had the courage and ability to take on greater ritual responsibilities. Instead of gathering only once a year, they began to gather to take the eight Mahāyāna precepts (theg chen gso sbyoryo) every month. This was suggested by an elderly monk from Karsha, Meme Khachen, who had lived in Tibet for many years. If they had not been to Tibet themselves, the nuns might not have merited the attention of this monk or had much success gathering donations of food and cash for their rituals. Angmo’s family gave each nun five rupees as principal, to start monthly prayers on the full moon of every month. The rupees were pooled as a fund on which to collect interest, while supplies for the actual ceremony were contributed by individual nuns. At first, each nun brought 1 kg butter, 5 kg roasted barley flour, a handful of tea, and a pinch of salt. They borrowed the cooking implements – a fat copper pot, a brass ladle, and tea strainer – from a village temple at the base of the cliff. Eventually, as membership grew, the original fund was abandoned. Now that the nunnery had 20 members, a rotation system was organized; one by one, the nuns took turns sponsoring the various rituals.27 At present, one or two nuns serve as stewards (gnyer pa) and sponsor the tri-monthly ritual assemblies at the nunnery by soliciting the requisites from their families.28

Many years after her pilgrimage to Tibet, Angmo decided to initiate a Great Prayer Festival (smyon lam chen mo) modeled upon the one that impressed her so greatly in Lhasa. Lhasa’s Great Prayer Festival had been imitated throughout Tibet and its borderlands, though none could match the original celebration in Lhasa, where until 1959, 21,000 monks maintained law and order for an entire month each year.29 At Karsha monastery today, the Great Prayer Festival involves 150 monks and over 440 residents of Karsha village, plus hundreds of donors from near and far who come to celebrate for nearly a month. When the nuns first initiated their own Great Prayer Festival, they invited monks to lead it and to teach them the ceremonies and prayers. By the late 1960s, Yeshe and her companions no longer needed assistance from the monks and began to organize the festival on their own. The nunnery’s Great Prayer Festival has become the single largest nunnery-based festival in Zangskar and it attracts hundreds of donors every year.30

As the nunnery’s largest ritual expense of the year, each Great Prayer Festival requires year-long preparation. Twelve months before the festival begins, one nun is chosen to be steward (gnyer pa). Each nun must take her turn in the dreaded position, which requires her to feast her colleagues at the nunnery for nearly a month. In the spring, the steward collects dung and firewood to feed the cooking fires during the festival. In summer, she travels to Zangskar’s high pasture camps (’brog sa) to collect cheese and butter (dkar slong) from the shepherds. During the fall harvest and all winter, she begs for alms (bsod snyoms) of grain and flour. In early spring, she gives a series of “begging beers” (slong chang) in nearby villages to request donations in cash or kind. In each village she selects, every household may send one adult to the party, where barley beer (chang) is the only fare. As the evening wears on and the guests become sufficiently inebriated, the sponsoring nun or her male relative solicits donations. Every guest must stand up and orally proclaim the exact gift he or she will make to the upcoming festival. In return, the steward hosts the sponsors when they deliver the promised goods during the festival.
Membership in the nunnery involves serving in a number of ritual offices, which the nuns take up by turns. Each nun serves as conch blower (diing ma), ritual assistant (chos g.yog), sacristan (dkon gnyer), assistant chant master (dbu chung), and chant master (dbu mdzad), a post that doubles as head nun. Except for the sacristan, all these positions involve a three-year tenure. The ritual assistant is responsible for making the dough and butter sculptures, offering cakes, and other aspects of the ritual altar whenever there is a collective ritual. The main ingredients of the ritual sculptures (butter, roasted barley flour, milk, beer, buttermilk, yogurt, saffron and other ritual spices) are provided by the sponsoring village. The ritual assistant must procure auspicious spices such as bzang drug which are required for esoteric rites. She takes care of the nunnery’s ritual items: the colored powders for dying butter sculptures, the woodblock and orange powder used to create the Vajrayogini mandala, plates for tossing gtor ma, butter lamps, offering bowls, and other ritual paraphernalia. The doorkeeper must go at dawn and dusk to the assembly hall to light butter lamps, refill offering bowls, and offer a litany of sounds and smells to the protective spirits: juniper incense, a ritual shake of the bell (dril bu) and hand drum (da ma ru), a quick crescendo of beats on a large drum (rga).

The most important post at the nunnery is that of head nun and chant master (dbu mdzad). This post is filled by each nun in turn, in order of seniority. According to the seating order, based on when she joined the assembly, each nun must serve her turn as chant master for a term of three years. Prior to serving as chantmaster, she spends three years training as assistant chant master, memorizing chants, and learning the innumerable details of running a religious institution of 20 women. The chant master has memorized scores of texts which she can recite on call, and bears sole responsibility for the nunnery’s collective resources, works and projects, ritual calendar, and annual investments or expenditures. The chant master combines the roles of C. E. O., principal shareholder, and office manager. When necessary, she even prepares the tea or meal requested by a donor before leading the necessary chants of a given rite. Although final adjudication of disputes and any disciplinary measures are decided by the abbot or by a unanimous vote of the entire assembly (dge ’don), she must also handle the internal politics and negotiate complaints registered by other nuns.

The Economic Basis of Female Renunciation

As a collective, the nunnery owns two small fields which yield a crop of 80–100 kg of grain per year, depending on the climate and on the crop sown (wheat, peas, or barley). The communal grain is used to feed visiting guests or the nuns on days of communal labor such as repairing the walls and path at the nunnery compound after each winter’s damage. When the next year’s seed and other expenses have been subtracted, each nun receives a lump sum of eight kg of grain every three years. The grain is distributed once every three years when the position of head nun shifts. At that time, a collective audit is conducted by the head nun in front of the entire community of nuns. All outstanding accounts, loans, and expenses are cleared before the new incoming head nun takes office. Two nuns serve as field stewards (zing gi gnyer pa) each year to organize the tilling of the nunnery’s fields. Karsha villagers are not obliged to participate in this process, although individual nuns may ask a male relative to assist with plowing in early spring, a task customarily forbidden to women. At that time the two stewards smooth the furrows; during spring and summer they are responsible for weeding and watering the fields. In the autumn half of the nuns are selected to perform the harvest, threshing, and winnowing.

The nunnery is relatively impoverished compared to most monastic establishments in Zangskar. Whereas Karsha monastery annually collects nearly 10,000 kg of grain and 450 kg of butter in tithes, and has a herd of 30 or more cows and crossbreeds, Karsha Nunnery does not own a single cow nor does it collect an ounce of grain in taxes or rent. Even butter lamps in the assembly hall are filled by the largesse of the sacristan (dkon gnyer) and other nuns, rather than from random village donations. The nunnery owns 40 goats, which are farmed out to the 20 member nuns who keep them at a relative’s home. Twice a year, during the Vajrayogini burnt offering and at the springtime Thousand Offerings of an Auspicious Era, every nun delivers to the nunnery a kilo of butter, which will be used to fill the substantial number of butter lamps required on these occasions. The rest of the butter produced by the goats is kept by the nun’s family in exchange for their daily care of the livestock. When a nun passes away or leaves the nunnery, the two goats must be returned to the collective (or other goats as substitutes if the original goats have died). Unlike the monks’ monastery, Karsha Nunnery does not receive obligatory loads of dung or thistles from surrounding villages. Every year each nun must collect four or five loads of thistle wood and two loads of dung as communal cooking fuel for the nunnery’s hearth.

The effect of the nunnery’s meager economic resources is twofold. First, collective rituals only occur when nuns solicit sufficient donations. Second, individual nuns must seek their own subsistence. The nunnery performs ad hoc rites for villagers, who provide the ritual expenses in the interest of making merit. Such rites include commemorative prayers for the deceased within the 49-day period between death and rebirth (bar do) and readings from selected texts. Individual nuns collect donations to sponsor all regular rituals on a rotating scheme, yet the nunnery’s calendar clearly is limited by the skill of the stewards and the generosity of the villagers. For instance, the duration of the Great Prayer Festival each year depends on the sponsoring nun’s fundraising abilities. A successful sponsor will hold the
festival for 20 days or more, while a less proficient nun may only manage 15 days. As the nunnery has grown more prominent, the duration and donations for the Great Prayer Festival have increased tremendously. The sharp increase in village donations over the last five years may reflect rising living standards or the nunnery's increased status. Since 1991, Karsha Nunnery has received some foreign sponsorship from the Ganden Choling Center in Toronto, Canada. The funds were pooled collectively to build a classroom, and initiate a modern study curriculum in Tibetan grammar, math, and English. The nuns also bought butter, tea, salt, and rations to serve a simple meal daily and tea during ritual assemblies held between December and May each year.

Although such foreign money has supplemented the nunnery's capital costs in terms of ritual expenses, it remains an insufficient endowment. In short, money is no substitute for the basic elements of Zangskari subsistence: butter, barley, and fuel. While the male monastery is maintained by extensive relations of patronage and privilege, the nunnery must rely on the generosity of its members and their families. A nun's life is a vocation, but not an occupation. Most nuns still descend to the village most days to perform domestic chores in exchange for their daily bread. They remain caught between two worlds — esoteric ritual and mundane production — which are essential to Zangskari livelihood. Nuns are pushed and pulled between nunnery and household, but can depend fully on neither.

A Fragile Economy of Merit

The hippo's feeble steps may err
In compassing material ends
While the True Church need never stir
To gather in its dividends...

Religious practice is fraught with the uncertainty of subsistence. While Zangskari monasteries are supported by sharecroppers and endowments, most nunneries are either landless or forced to till their small land holdings by themselves. The nunneries do not receive grain tithes, but are supported mainly by voluntary donations. The stark contrast between the landed wealth of the monasteries and the few token fields owned by the nunneries is testimony to centuries of Zangskari patronage and a belief in the innate superiority of the monks as ritual mediators. This economic disparity has magnified the differences between the male and female establishments. While monks belong to an endowed institution which guarantees their future, nuns are part of institution which demands loyalty but cannot guarantee survival. Thus, while monks are urged to sever their domestic obligations, nuns are bound to hearth and home. Due to more patronage, monks may pursue higher studies, which legitimize their status as ritual officiants, while nuns do not receive higher education nor any advanced ritual instruction. It should not surprise us that monks are called upon to serve as ritual officiants more often than nuns. While both monastics may practice similar visualizations and meditations, their public roles are dramatically different. The significant advances of Yeshe and her colleagues in the latter half of this century bode well for the status of nuns in the next millennium. Indeed, several new nunneries have been founded recently in Ladakh, while membership at Zangskari and Ladakhi nunneries continues to grow and may eventually outpace the declining membership at monasteries. Centuries of disproportionate patronage cannot be undone overnight, yet the dedication of a few nuns has altered the religious landscapes in one Himalayan region beyond their, and our, expectations.

Notes
1 I thank all of the Zangskari nuns whose infinite kindness and limitless patience have provided a living picture of the bodhisattva of compassion upon whom they meditate. I especially thank Sarah Levine, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Jan Willis, Michael Aris, Nur Yalman, Arthur Kleinman, Henry Osmaston, and John Crook for conversations and correspondences relating to my research in Zangskar. My fieldwork between 1991 and 1997 was supported by the Jacob Javits Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and Harvard's Department of Anthropology. I have used the standard Wylie system of transliteration for Tibetan terms.
2 Zangskar is a subdistrict of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, which lies amidst the Greater Himalayan range. With an area of 7,000 square km, Zangskar is slightly smaller than Sikkim. It is inhabited by only 12,000 people, making it one of the least populated sub-districts in India.
5 Tied thang, shamb thabs, chos gos.
6 The proportions of the robes are ritually specified. The upper robe (gzan gos, nam za) has 2.5 lengthwise folds and nine widthwise folds. The outer yellow robe (chos gos) has seven folds lengthwise and 2.5 folds widthwise. Both these robes are 6 x 3 cubits in size. The
lower robe (sham thabs, thang goa) has 5 folds lengthwise and 2.5 folds widthwise. It is 5 x 2 cubits, but can be shortened to 1.5 cubits.

In theory, a nun need only do 100,000 repetitions of each meditational practice; however, she performs an additional 11,111 of each practice in case her attention has lapsed at any point in the process.

Bodhicitta denotes the state of mind in which practitioners seek enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. According to Lhalungpa, it is “at once an enlightening attitude and a state of awareness, each of which is both a means to the goal and the goal itself.” Lobsang Lhalungpa, The Life of Milarepa (Boston: Shambhala, 1984), p. xv


Yeshe simply stated: “De snga mo mig phyi, ‘di bla ma dkon mchog la tshigs rje, bla ma sangs rgyas dang stas ba’i bla ma tshigs rje, nga ma sbya, nga zha nor zha meag, gags po bde mo rag, tho res snga ma nga rang rnam shes yong ni mi yong, tho res snga mo lang byes yong ni mi yong, nga sbya nas, ci bya en, bla ma dkon mchog gi tshigs rje, she cha nas, khangs bzang yin nor, nga ja ngam mo gun.”


Michael Diener, et. al., eds., The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), pp. 296. Note that Samanthabhadra (Kun tu bzang po) is “...viewed as the protector of all those who teach the Dharma and is regarded as an embodiment of the wisdom of essential sameness, i.e., the insight into the unity of sameness and difference.” Ibid, p. 377.

Abbi Yeshe explained: “Sems rnam par dag pa zer nas sams bzang po, rgyal ba, sems dkar po. Gzhan mi sems pa ngan pa mi bcos. Sems pa nag po mi bcos zer te zer re nag. Sems rnam par dag pa ni don dbyin. Phad byang chub sems zer nas, sams dkar po, mi snyid, khun dog mi byes, cho dang nga rgyal mi bcos, mi nor na thob byes mi bsam. De rang chos phad byangs nang la pha ma ‘gro ba rigs drug sams can thams cad dag pa sangs rgyas zhih du skyes zhih byes.”

rDo rje rnal ‘byor ma brgyud.

Retreat practices involve four elements (bsnyen pa bzhi): (1) a complete ritualization of all movements and posture of the body (lus kyi bsnyen pa); (2) the counting of mantras (grang kyi bsnyen pa); (3) visualizing and dissolving oneself into the deity (mtshan ma’i bsnyen pa); and (4) the generation and (ultimately) completion stages of the yoga practiced (sams briyan gi bsnyen pa).

The yoga of sleep specifies that the practitioner should sleep with her head to the north and facing west where the dakinis reside.


I refer to Bourdieu’s definition of habitus as “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations... history turned into nature (and denied as such).” P. Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, trans. by R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 78.


Although their vows forbid them from killing, most Zangskari monastics do eat meat. They justify this by eating meat which was slaughtered by passing Muslims or meat from an animal that has died a “natural” death, such as falling off a cliff or dying suddenly in its stall.

The Geshe had received the Vajrayogini empowerment from the head of Gaden Monastery, who had transmitted the same initiation to his foremost pupil, the 14th Dalai lama.

Compare Sherry Ortner’s descriptions of the founding of a Sherpa nunnery in Nepal which indicate that although local nuns initiated the fundraising, they first needed to secure the legitimation of a male monastic, the head of Tengboche monastery. “The Founding of the First Sherpa Nunnery and the Problem of Women as an Analytic Category,” Feminist Revisions: What Has Been and Might Be, ed. V. Patraka and L. Tilly (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Women’s Study Program, 1983), pp. 93-134; and High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

The nuns still quip: “We carried every rock in Tandzin’s new house on our back. Maybe we should call the house bsam geig zhal bla brang instead...” They pur by calling Tandzin’s private house a labrang, a term ordinarily reserved for monastic institutions founded by important monks. Unlike monasteries, most nunneries do not have a labrang, since they have such small endowments.

After the Geshe had made his pleads, the nuns held so-called “begging beer” parties (dong chang) in three nearby villages in order to solicit wood for the subsidiary beams and walls. In 1984, the nuns constructed their own Labrang roofs. The nuns carried this wood on their backs for up to 30 km. to their construction site, as there was still no vehicular transport within Zangskar in those days.

These murals include the Buddha Skayamuni, the 16 arhat, Tsongkhapa and his two disciples, the lineage holders for the nun’s Vajrayogini practice, and a group of protectors (chos skyong), including Phyag na zdo rje, ‘Jigs byed, mGon po phyag drug pa, and rDo rje rnal ‘byor ma.


Turn by turn, a single nun serves as sponsor for the rituals held on the 10th and 25th days of each Tibetan month, while two nuns serve as sponsors for the more extensive rite on the 15th. Each ritual roughly demands: 1.3 kg of butter for tea and butter lamps, 7 kg of roasted barley flour for the communal offering cakes (ts hog), 10 kg of wheat flour for the breads (except on the tenth when no breads are served), one bottle of beer or buttermilk as leavening agent for the breads, a handful of salt, two handfuls of loose green tea, and a plateful of ts sposób, which is an assortment of fried dough, sweets, biscuits, and dried meat to go along with the offering cakes.

According to Li An-Che, at Labrang Monastery in Amdo, the Great Prayer Festival of 1940 involved a population of 3,600 monks who consumed 45 yaks, 6,000 kg of rice,
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Born Buddhist is Not Enough

Tashi Zangmo

I feel very fortunate to have been born in a Buddhist country where Buddhism is very much alive and valued. The Royal Government of Bhutan is trying its best to give equal opportunities for both women and men to get an education and Buddhism continues to flourish throughout the country. Nevertheless, there is a strong preconception in Bhutanese society that profound religious and philosophical studies are meant only for men. The nuns lag far behind in traditional Buddhist learning, to say nothing of the laywomen. The monks receive pride of place in the monasteries and Buddhist institutes of the land.

My vision is to serve nuns and laywomen who wish to receive a traditional Buddhist education. With this vision in mind, I went to Vârānasi in 1987 to study Buddhist philosophy at the Central Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies. I was the first woman from Bhutan to study Buddhist philosophy there. When I arrived, there were eight Tibetan women students. All of them had been studying since 1985. Since then, all of these women have completed their studies, and some have gone on to do graduate studies, too, usually in philosophy. They are now serving as teachers in Tibetan refugee schools in settlements all over India.

There is a quota for women students at the Central Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies. Only a certain number of women are accepted each year. Originally the Institute was only for monks, but gradually this has changed. Now that a new hostel has been built, the number of women accepted has grown. Except for one other Bhutanese student, who joined the year after I did, all the women students are Tibetan. Although many of us are laywomen, at the Institute we live like nuns.

The curriculum at the Institute focuses on philosophy, both Indian and Tibetan. The courses are taught in Tibetan, but we study Sanskrit and other languages as well. Learning all these languages was a struggle for me and I had to race to keep up. Because the courses were very intensive, I learned many new things that I otherwise would have missed in my life. This fortunate opportunity, not easily gained, taught me many useful things.