

**GENDERED ROLES IN BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS
PRACTICES IN BHUTAN: A CASE STUDY OF TWO
NUNNERIES**

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**FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA
KUALA LUMPUR**

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NUNNERIES**

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**FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
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ABSTRACT

There is a general consensus amongst Buddhist scholars that institutional Buddhism, which is the monastic institution is highly patriarchal and have systematically subordinated Buddhist nuns for centuries. Such subordination has resulted in the loss of opportunities for Buddhist nuns to follow the spiritual path laid out by the Buddha, who saw no difference between the spiritual capability of men and women. Loss of opportunities translates into a battle for survival of Buddhist nuns who renounced the comforts of the household life in pursuit of enlightenment. Moreover, elision of nuns from literature on Bhutan has produced a gap in literature, further pushing the nuns into the background. This research fills this gap through an ethnographical study of the religious lives of Vajrayāna Buddhist nuns in two nunneries, one each in Western and Eastern Bhutan. The primary objective of this thesis is to gauge the level of empowerment of nuns in Bhutan, with particular focus on nuns' access to monastic education and their role in society. The study explored the traditions, practices, scriptures, symbolism and theologies of Vajrayāna Buddhism to determine Bhutanese women's place in the secular and religious realm. The relationship between patriarchal structures in Buddhist institutions and specific Buddhist texts was analysed to understand the root of gender discrimination. This study revealed that the roles of nuns in the two study areas are largely gendered in a manner which denies nuns opportunities for personal development, empowerment and subsequently, opportunities to be able to be more socially engaged. Nuns are still denied access to systematic monastic education, freely available to monks in Bhutan and have issues with basic needs. The results of this study will be used to highlight to the Bhutanese government and monastic institutions in Bhutan the issues surrounding Bhutanese nuns with a view to invoke policy changes on women and religious practice in the country.

ABSTRAK

Para cendekiawan agama Buddha semasa berpendapat bahawa institusi agama Buddha, iaitu institusi biara sangat berunsurkan patriarki dan sejak berkurun mensubordinatkan biarawati agama tersebut. Tindakan pembawahan biarawati telah mengakibatkan kehilangan peluang di kalangan biarawati yang ingin mengikuti hala tuju rohani sebagaimana yang ditunjuk ajar oleh Buddha yang tidak membezakan antara kebolehan rohaniah lelaki mahupun wanita. Kehilangan peluang tersebut menyebabkan pergelutan kelangsungan kehidupan para biarawati agama Buddha yang meninggalkan kemewahan rumahtangga semata-mata untuk mencari pencerahan kerohanian. Malahan, pengguguran para biarawati daripada kesusasteraan negara Bhutan mewujudkan kekosongan sastera; justeru membelakangi biarawati dengan lebih lanjut. Penyelidikan ini berhasrat mengisi kekosongan tersebut melalui kajian etnografik yang merangkumi kehidupan keagamaan biarawati agama Vajrayāna Buddha di dua buah biara, satu di sebelah Barat dan Timur Bhutan masing-masing. Objektif utama tesis ini ialah untuk mengkaji tahap pemeraksanaan biarawati di Bhutan, memfokus kepada akses kepada pendidikan keagamaan dan peranan mereka dalam masyarakat. Kajian ini juga meneliti tradisi, amalan, kitab, simbol dan teologi agama Vajrayāna Buddha untuk menentukan peranan wanita di arena duniawi mahupun keagamaan. Hubungkait antara struktur patriarki di institusi agama Buddha dan kesusasteraan Buddha telah dianalisa untuk memahami punca diskriminasi gender. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa peranan biarawati di kedua-dua kawasan kaji selidik secara keseluruhannya berunsurkan gender lantas menyekat peluang mereka untuk membangun secara keperibadian, keperkasaan dan interaksi sosial. Biarawati masih lagi mempunyai kekangan seperti akses kepada pendidikan keagamaan yang dinikmati oleh biarawan dan kekangan sara hidup. Hasil kajian ini akan dikemukakan kepada kerajaan Bhutan dan institusi biara di negara tersebut supaya polisi terhadap wanita dan amalan agama digubal semula di negara tersebut.

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BNF	:	Bhutan Nuns' Foundation
C.E	:	Common Era
DCM	:	Dodge Central of Michigan
DVD	:	Digital Versatile Disc
FGD	:	Focus Group Discussions
GNH	:	Gross National Happiness
GNP	:	Gross National Product
M.A	:	Master of Arts
Nu	:	Ngultrum
RBA	:	Royal Bhutanese Army
RBG	:	Royal Bodyguard
Skt	:	Sanskrit
Tib	:	Tibetan
TV	:	Television
UNICEF	:	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
USA	:	United States of America

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background: Bhutan—A Kingdom in Transition

Bhutan or Druk Yul (Land of the Thunder Dragon) is a small country nestled in the Eastern Himalayas and is the only country in the world that recognizes Vajrayāna Buddhism as its official religion (Crossette, 1995; Wangchuck, 2006). Since the 17th century, Bhutanese call their homeland Druk Yul, in reference to the country's dominant Buddhist sect. Bhutan, the name given to the country by the British, is the name used for most official and international business matters. Bhutan borders China's Tibet Autonomous Region to the north and to the east, south and west, respectively, with the Indian States of Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Assam; and Sikkim (see Figure 1.1, p.2). Bhutan is well known for its beautiful landscape and for its drive to achieve Gross National Happiness (GNH) for its citizens is a small country nestled in the Eastern Himalayas.

The country is generally divided into five regions; western, eastern, northern, central and southern. The Bhutanese population is far from homogenous as there are four main ethnic groups in Bhutan. The indigenous peoples of Bhutan are called 'Drukpa', while people of Nepali origin are called Lhotsampas, who are concentrated in the southern districts of Bhutan, who migrated to Bhutan around the end of the nineteenth century (Wangchuck, 2006). The western Bhutanese people, Ngalongpas or Ngalops speak Dzongkha, which is the official language of Bhutan. Dzongkha is a modified version of the Tibetan language and adopts its writing system (*choekey*). Ngalops migrated from the Tibetan plateau and they are credited with being the first to bring Buddhism to the country (Wangchuck, 2006). The eastern Bhutanese people and their language are collectively referred to as Sharchokpa, are believed to be the ancestors of those earliest residents, live mostly in eastern Bhutan. Their early ancestor tribes may have originated from Burma

(Myanmar) and northeast India. It is also believed that Indo-Mongoloids (usually referred to as Monpas, which means non-Tibetans) migrated into Bhutan two thousand years ago from Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, northern Burma, and Thailand (Wangchuck, 2006).



Figure 1.1: Map of Bhutan¹

The two other languages, Bumthangka, an aboriginal Kheng language spoken in central Bhutan; and Nepali, or Lhotsam, predominantly spoken in the south. Apart from the four major languages discussed above, seven other Kheng and Mon languages are also spoken in Bhutan. Hindi is understood among Bhutanese educated in India which was incidentally, the language of instruction in schools at Haa and Bumthang in the early

¹ Source: <http://www.mapsofworld.com> and Google Earth

1930s as well as in the first schools in the "formal" education system from the beginning of the 1960s.

Bhutan, whose size is comparable to that of Switzerland, stands at little over 700,000 people. Known as the 'forbidden land' (Wangchuck, 2006: 1), attributed mainly to its geography, Bhutan was isolated for centuries till the early 1960s when the Indian Army assisted the country to build its first north-south paved roads connecting the plains of Indian Bengal and the higher valleys of Bhutan's Paro and its capital, Thimphu (Crossette, 1995; Rhodes, 2000; Wangchuck, 2006). The period between 1952, when the third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck ascended the Dragon Throne until his demise in 1972 marked the beginning of a new era for Bhutan (Rhodes, 2000; Wangchuck, 2006). The third king instituted modernisation of Bhutan with the introduction of modern secular education, a National Assembly to decentralise political control from the capital to the rest of the 24 districts, a secular legislation and high courts, a currency (Ngultrum), a banking and postal system. However, Bhutan is still a country in transition as much of rural Bhutan today still maintains a traditional subsistence based economy with two-thirds of its population dependent on agriculture for their livelihood (Wangchuck, 2006).

Bhutanese are predominantly Buddhists and the only other religion which is accepted in Bhutan is Hinduism, the religion of the people of Nepali origin (Wangchuck, 2006). Vajrayāna Buddhism became Bhutan's state religion in the seventeenth century, founded in the Drukpa Kagyu school of Vajrayāna (Tibetan) Buddhism (Crossette, 1995; Wangchuck, 2006). Bhutanese display a very strong adherence to Vajrayāna Buddhism which is evident in almost every aspect of Bhutanese life (Wangchuck, 2006). There are more than 2000 monasteries (*gonpa*) and temples (*lhakhang*) in Bhutan, with each village having a temple, around which community life revolves (Wangchuck, 2006). Each district (*dzongkhag*) in the country has a *dzong*, which is an enormous fortress combining both

administrative and religious complex which functions as the seat of government for the local jurisdiction (Amundsen, 2001; Wangchuck, 2006).

The great Indian saint and teacher, Guru Padmasambhava (see Figure 1.2, p.5), who is credited with establishing Buddhism in Tibet founded Buddhism in Bhutan in 747 AD. Guru Rinpoche, as he is more popularly known by the Bhutanese, was the founder of the Nyingma school of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Tibet who is revered in Bhutan as a second Buddha. The Guru is the focal point of Buddhism in Bhutan, being worshipped in almost every temple and monastery in the country.

Bhutan's political development is heavily influenced by its religious history and totally dominated by male figures, revolving mainly around religious heads of state to present constitutional monarchs. Other than Guru Rinpoche, the Bhutanese deeply revere the Shabdrung, Drukpa Kinley, Phajo Drugom Zhigpo, Dorji Lingpa, Pema Lingpa and all five kings of Bhutan who have been ruling the country since 1907. Phajo Drugom Zhigpo (1184-1251) introduced the Drukpa Kargyu School from Tibet into Bhutan (Pommaret, 2000). Dorji Lingpa (1346-1405) was a treasure revealer (*terton*). Treasure revealers are important figures in Vajrayāna Buddhism as they are prophesised by past masters as the ones who will seek out hidden religious texts when the time is right. Pema Lingpa (1450-1521), was the most important Bhutanese *terton* and the most famous Bhutanese-born figure to carve a name in the Tibetan (Vajrayāna) Buddhist world. The descendants of Phajo Drugom Zhigpo became religious nobility whereas the descendants of Dorji Lingpa and Pema Lingpa became the noble families in Bumthang and also in Trongsa, the latter being the ancestor of the present king of Bhutan (Pommaret, 2000).



Figure 1.2: Statue of Guru Padmasambhava in Sikkim²

² Source: Fieldwork (2012)

The religious environment in Bhutan is a protected one, which is a by-product of the theocratic state formed and dominated by the Drukpa Kagyu school (Crossette, 1995), which is the state religion of Bhutan (Wangchuck, 2006). The Drukpa Kagyu School controls the religious affairs of the state and vehemently opposes the proliferation of other religions in Bhutan, including different schools of Buddhism. The only other Vajrayāna school of Buddhism in Bhutan is the Nyingmapa School, which is adhered by the royal family of Bhutan (Wikan, 1996; Wangchuck, 2006). As a consequence, the monastic institution in Bhutan is still highly conservative and hasn't been able to adapt to suit the needs of the people of Bhutan who are undergoing sweeping modernization in almost every sphere of life (Crossette, 1995). The ultra-conservative monastic institution is credited with perpetuating gender inequalities in a rigid religious environment in Bhutan as there is little will to change the male-dominated status-quo maintained since the inception of Buddhism in Bhutan.

1.1.1 Winds of Drastic Change

Bhutan has just emerged from a hereditary absolute monarchy system, which was passed from father to son, an entirely male lineage, established by Sir Ugyen Wangchuck, on 17 December 1907 who reigned till 1926. Sir Ugyen Wangchuck unified the nation, established friendly relations with Britain, and set his dynasty's political agenda. Upon his death, his son, Jigme Wangchuck (1926-1952) became the Second Druk Gyalpo, then Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1952-1972), the Third Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Singye Wangchuck (1972-2006) the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and the present Fifth Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (since 2006) who is now a constitutional monarch (Wangchuck, 2006). Winds of political change began to once again blow in Bhutan a century after the Wangchuck absolute monarchy seized power from the Shabdrung when the fourth King introduced significant reforms in political and administrative powers. He commissioned

the preparation of a new constitution, presented it in early 2005 and then announced that he would abdicate the throne in favor of his son in 2008. On 14 December 2006, the fourth king passed the Raven crown to the crown prince who officially ascended the Dragon throne on 6 November 2008 and became the fifth king of Bhutan. Bhutan's first ever elections of the national parliament for the upper (National Council) and lower (National Assembly) were held in December 2007 and March 2008 respectively (Wangchuk, 2006; Imaeda, 2008). Bhutan thus transformed from an absolute monarchy which lasted 100 years to a constitutional monarchy.

The modernisation of Bhutan beginning in the early 1960s dramatically changed the lives of the Bhutanese people from medievalism to modern nationhood (Wangchuck, 2006). Bhutanese society is fast moving from a wholly subsistence-based agrarian society which was to a large extent, matrifocal, to a market-based economy which has begun to increase gender-based disparities in Bhutanese society. The effect of the adoption of a market-based economy on the Bhutanese household, especially in terms of gender relations can be observed as early as the 1980s. Women's role in agriculture work became increasingly significant, often outnumbering men who were leaving for the urban areas for industrial and commercial activities. In mid-1980s, 95% of women in Bhutan between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four years were involved in agriculture work compared with only 78% of men of the same age group. Overall, women provided more labour than men in all sectors of the economy (Zangmo, 2009).

Despite the harsh agriculture work, the Bhutanese were content with their lives as there was simply no other option known to them. This contentment is the basis for Bhutan's international fame as the Land of Happiness. However, with the introduction of foreign culture, goods and services, this hidden "Shangri-la" emerged from centuries of isolation and thrust into globalisation in less than half a century.

Bhutan embraced partial globalisation with the introduction of modern telecommunications in 1973. Nonetheless, television was banned in the country when other nations were fully absorbed in information technology. Nonetheless, on 2 June 1999, on the silver jubilee anniversary of his coronation, His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, officially launched television and internet in Bhutan.

The advent of full-scale globalisation and the introduction of information technology have brought significant progress to Bhutan, in terms of education, civil service, politics, industry and many others spheres. Bhutan is the largest exporter of hydro-electric power to India and is expanding its educational institutions rapidly.³ Despite the best intentions of His Majesty the Fourth King for the progress of the nation, Bhutan has struggled to cope with the scale of modernisation introduced in so short a time-frame which has inevitably resulted in negative consequences. Though Bhutan has progressed in various arenas, it has also steadily regressed in its traditions, cultures and values. For example, since the introduction of television, children, housewives and scores of devout Buddhist families have had a drastic change in lifestyle, from agriculturalists to couch potatoes, glued to the “idiot box” for hours at end. Youth, whose values have traditionally been moulded by the Buddhist clergy have now begun to model their lives on television personalities instead, neglecting the traditional values and culture of the country. Even the Buddhist clergy has been swept by the currents of change, which is evident through several cases of Buddhist monks neglecting their religious duties, preferring to indulge in the internet and movies.⁴

The Bhutanese who have traditionally depended on a subsistence economy are beginning to throng to the cities, lured by materialism and consumerism. The Bhutanese are becoming a class and brand conscious society whereby the economic gap is widening; thereby creating a new affluent class which many Bhutanese now covet for. With

³ (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhutan>)

⁴(<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/bhutan/perspectivesa.html>)

television and popular culture, also came a new world of violence and crime which the Bhutanese had been shielded from for centuries. The scale and depth of exposure to violence shown on television and witnessed on the internet, especially internet games are unprecedented to the average Bhutanese. Economic migrants from various parts of rural Bhutan who have abandoned agriculture hoping to secure cash employment in the cities end up jobless and in desperation, resort to alcoholism, substance abuse and even crime like stealing, including burglary of temples and stupas, which was virtually unheard of until the 1990s (Crosette, 1995; Crins, 2008). Corruption, nepotism and favouritism have crept into the civil service especially since absolute monarchy was dissolved in 2008.

Apart from internal threats to the nation's long-term sustainability, Bhutan is also struggling to maintain its sovereignty as it is sandwiched between two large nations who are constantly coveting for Bhutan's rich natural resources. Bhutan borders China to the north and India to the east, west and south. The border with China is largely not established creating avenues for border disputes along the 269 square kilometres border. In late 2005, the Chinese started building roads and bridges in this disputed border lands which Bhutan fears China might use to further claim the borders and the areas along the border. As far as India is concerned, the Indian Government adopts a policy of non-interference in the internal administration of Bhutan in adherence to the Indo-Bhutan Friendship Treaty signed on 8 February 2007. Officially, the two nations are to respect each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Unofficially, external relations between the two nations are also rocky as India often threatens to withdraw supplies to Bhutan which is fully dependent on India for goods and services, infrastructure and even security (Wangchuk, 2009).

In terms of women's empowerment, education for the girl child, either secular or monastic, was not high on the agenda of the Bhutanese feudal lords and subsequently, kingdom. As a result, about two thirds of adult (15 years and above) Bhutanese women

remain illiterate to this day. Now, with the introduction of the Education for All policy in Bhutan, girls are finally being accorded equal secular education rights but access to schools for girls remains a problem due to family poverty, importance of labour of the girl child in the fields and remoteness of villages from where schools are located (Choden, 2005).

Where monastic education is concerned, Bhutan has traditionally educated its boys through a systematic education on Buddhist philosophy and in the past half century, through its secular education system (Crins, 2008). Bhutanese nuns on the other hand have traditionally been deprived of monastic education and continue to be deprived as the country's sweeping changes have not permeated into the rigid monastic institution (Crins, 2008; Sinha, 2001). The stagnant gender-biased time-warp in the religious realm which is largely inherited from early Indian-Buddhism, but perpetuated by pre-Buddhist cultural practices which are steeped in dualism - female/male purity/impurity, will be discussed in detail throughout this thesis.

1.2 Visions of Sustainability—Gross National Happiness and Contemporary Bhutanese Society

In response to the major transitions in the country and the corresponding impacts arising from globalisation, Bhutan has tried to mitigate these negative consequences through the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). GNH is the Middle Path which aims to balance excessive emphasis on capitalistic development as defined by the Western world. Thus, what is called for is an approach to development that embraces ecological sustainability, cultural preservation, and spiritual development, to devise alternative measures of progress instead of the conventional Gross National Product (GNP).

Bhutan has been very protective of its traditional values, especially because it is the last surviving Himalayan Buddhist kingdom, struggling to preserve its sovereignty.⁵ To preserve Bhutan's cultural identity, the government introduced in the 1980s a "one nation, one people" policy called *driglam namzha* (national customs and etiquette) (Crins, 2008). The Bhutanese government hoped to achieve integration through requiring national dress—the *kira* for women and the *gho* for men—in public places (by a May 1989 decree that was quickly reversed and confined only to official business) and insisting that individual conduct be based on Buddhist precepts. The government stressed standardization and popularization of the national language, Dzongkha as well as actively promoting Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the country's baseline policy on sustainable development. The concept of GNH, according to (Wangchuck, 2006) is:

Put very simply, GNH is based on the conviction that material wealth alone does not bring happiness, or ensure the contentment and well-being of the people; and that economic growth and 'modernization' should not be at the expense of the people's quality of life or traditional values. To achieve GNH, several policy areas were given priority - equitable socio-economic development in which prosperity is shared by every region of the country and every section of society; conservation and protection of the pristine environment; the preservation and promotion of Bhutan's unique cultural heritage; and providing good, responsive governance in which the people participate. These are the principles that have driven the king's policy.

GNH aims to strike a balance between material and non-material values and to achieve a balanced development while still maintaining core religious and cultural values of the Bhutanese people. GNH is based on four main pillars: Better education for all and health, conservation and promotion of an existing culture, environmental protection and good governance (Tashi, 2004). The concept of GNH was first conceived by the Fourth King of Bhutan in 1976 and then introduced actively in 1998 as a means of placing the Buddhist and traditional values at the core of Bhutanese life, replacing the conventional global frenzy of measuring a country's progress solely through economic means—through the Gross National Product. The concept stresses the importance of balancing material,

⁵The other Himalayan kingdoms were Ladakh and Sikkim (usurped by India in 1975) and Tibet (conquered by China in 1959)

spiritual and emotional well-being in nation-building, rejecting the common global view that human happiness commensurates with economic growth (GNHC, 1999).

The Bhutanese government believes that the primary driver of GNH is the Buddhist and traditional values of the Bhutanese people. GNH is a prized solution to coping with the numerous challenges which come with economic development. As a nation in transition which has only in the last 40 years embraced the market economy and introduced modern conveniences such as colour television, Bhutan is ill-prepared to cope with its rapid economic progress (Crins, 2008). New social problems such as violence, alcoholism and substance abuse which have cropped up due to rapid urbanisation is a cause for concern for the Bhutanese government and considered as one of the biggest challenges to Bhutan as a GNH nation (Crins, 2008). According to Bhutan's former Prime Minister, Jigme Y. Thinley, the rising social problems in the country can be mitigated by curbing mass migration from rural to urban areas. In fact, Thinley suggests that Bhutanese return to the farms in the hinterland and lead simple lives, which will ensure greater happiness than living in urban areas where people are alienated from the community spirit and traditional Buddhist values (Goldsmith, 2012). Therefore, GNH is seen as the solution for social problems and the basis for training Bhutanese citizens in the development of the mind to create citizens with good conduct of body, speech and mind to develop a sense of responsibility for the nation and not solely for personal gain (Galay and Ura, 2004).

GNH in Bhutan is firmly established on four pillars of which the first and foremost is on Better Education for All. GNH aims to bridge the gender gap in education and has to a certain extent, provided equal access to secular education to all Bhutanese children. However, GNH has not yet permeated into the monastic realm and nuns still remain illiterate and dependent on monks. Since traditionally monastic education was only for monks, nuns had to be content with reciting mantras and doing simple prayers. Buddhist

philosophy was the sole domain of the monks, and remains largely so till this day. Education for nuns was once again neglected even when Her Highness the Queen Mother Ashi Tshering Yangden Wangchuk started the Bhutan Nuns Project which was initiated to provide nunneries with infrastructural support in terms of water, sanitation, shelter but which has fallen short of its objective to help nuns get equal access to monastic education. Thus, Bhutan's vision for equal education for all is still beyond the reach of most of the 1000 Buddhist nuns in the country (Zangmo, 2009). I will reserve the rest of the narrative on the status of women in Bhutan in the results and discussion chapters.

1.3 The Lost Voices—Invisible Nuns of Bhutan

This study focuses on gendered roles in Buddhist practice in Bhutan, both past and present, to understand the current problems faced by female Buddhist practitioners in the country. I am a Buddhist nun of Bhutan, aiming to gather the voices of my fellow Bhutanese nuns through my academic study as a platform for social change.

1.3.1 Statement of the Problem

For centuries, Buddhist nuns in my country have remained as bystanders and watched the male clergy progress intellectually, spiritually and materially. This forgotten group of women in monastic robes appear in the shadows, slotted here and there in religious biographies of men. Bhutanese nuns are invisible as they are hardly mentioned in religious biographies or oral stories but when they are mentioned, they are portrayed as killers (Penjore, 2005) or beings of lesser intellectual capacity that need male figures to liberate them from the cyclic existence of *samsāra*. Nuns remain invisible in contemporary Bhutanese literature as well as modern academic writings (Mittra and Kumar, 2004). According to Simmer-Brown (2002:137), Western Tibetology had tended to focus on the institutional aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhism, “almost completely

neglecting the contributions, insights, and transmissions of women, which have often been seen as superstitious or merely folk traditions.” Gross (1993) and Aziz (2007) attributed this to the essentially patriarchal nature of Western scholarship, which elevates monastic traditions and classical texts, thereby reinforcing the “patriarchal habits of Buddhist institutions in Tibet” (Simmer-Brown, 2002:137).

Nuns hardly have the opportunity to emerge from the background as nuns are sidelined in the everyday practices by the lay people as well as *samgha*. They are given little opportunity to participate in public and private events as monks are the preferred choice of the laypeople. In terms of women’s involvement in governance, although officially the government has encouraged greater participation of women in political and administrative life, male members of the traditional aristocracy dominate the social system. In the religious arena, women are still overshadowed by the paternalistic monastic body, and continue to struggle to receive even basic religious instructions while in civil society, the oldest women’s association lacks the resources and autonomy to carry out meaningful projects to improve the lives of Bhutanese women (Zangmo, 2009).

1.3.2 Objectives and Research Questions

The invisibility of Bhutanese nuns is a chronic problem which has persisted for centuries, resulting in severe lack of opportunities in religious practice as well as perpetual confinement to minor religious roles, more often than not, gendered. Therefore, in order to bridge the gender gap in the religious realm, I have attempted to understand, through this dissertation, the roots of gender inequality in religious practice in Bhutan, with particular focus on nuns’ access to education, monastic or secular. In particular, I have focused on the identification of gendered roles in current religious practices in Bhutan. This necessitates an analysis of the institutions, traditions, practices, scriptures,

and symbolism of Vajrayāna Buddhism which determines the role of nuns in religious practice in Bhutan.

Consequently, I have modelled the research framework on three primary research questions based on the following three research objectives.

1. To gauge the level of empowerment of Vajrayāna Buddhist nuns in religious practice in Bhutan, especially in terms of monastic education;
2. To analyse the role of Bhutanese nuns in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with; and
3. To analyse the traditions, practices, scriptures, and symbolism of Vajrayāna Buddhism that support women's empowerment and those that do not in order to understand the key factors which contribute to gender discrimination in religious practice in Bhutan.

The first research question focuses on the individual nuns' spiritual practice and reads as follows:

- 1: Are the Bhutanese nuns sufficiently empowered to be able to practice the Vajrayāna Buddhist spiritual path and attain realisations?

The primary duty of any Buddhist monk or nun is to study the Buddha's teachings and put it into practice as best as they can to achieve realisations on the path to enlightenment with the ultimate aim of transcending cyclic existence (Skt: *samsāra*). Therefore, before they can be of help to others, they have to be good practitioners themselves and reasonably good role models for others to emulate. The key focus in this research question is whether the Bhutanese nuns have access to religious instructions and initiations, especially access to the study of Buddhist philosophy (monastic education).

The Mahāyāna Buddhist spiritual path, of which Vajrayāna Buddhist practice is grounded in, is not based on selfish contentment of one's own liberation from *samsāra*. Rather, it places heavy emphasis on the Bodhisattva (Buddhahood aspirant who helps

others to become Buddhas as well) path. The ultimate aim of any genuine Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioner would be to work tirelessly to free all sentient beings from the sufferings of *samsāra* and lead them to Buddhahood. Therefore, Mahāyāna Buddhism considers practicing the Buddha's teachings (Skt: *dharma*) for oneself as a lesser motivation compared with attaining Buddhahood for all sentient beings.

Hence, the next research question will naturally expand in scope to cover the welfare of others:

2: Do Bhutanese nuns play a role in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with?

What I am endeavouring to discern is whether my fellow Bhutanese nuns have the skills, opportunity and resources to contribute to the betterment of the Bhutanese people. More specifically, I am interested in the level of empowerment of Bhutanese nuns in contributing to the propagation of Buddhism in the communities in which they live and interact with as this has a direct impact on the role which they play in society. Being invisible for centuries, I hope to at least highlight some of the nuns' accomplishments while at the same time, understand their constraints in being unable to be of the fullest benefit to society.

The third and final research question reads,

3: What are the aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhist institutionalism, traditions, practices, scriptures, and symbolism in Bhutan that support women's empowerment and those that do not?

Just as how the second research question builds up on the first, similarly, this research question is an expansion of the first two research questions whereby I am trying to uncover the underlying factors in Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan which contribute to nuns' empowerment, i.e. to identify any best practices which can be replicated by other Bhutanese nuns outside the study area. In cases where the nuns are not empowered in

some spheres of religious practice, I am interested to unearth the reasons for their lack of empowerment in order to aid the nuns in improving themselves and elevating their status in society so that they will be of maximum benefit to themselves and all sentient beings. Here, my intention is to gauge the roots of any form of subordination of Buddhist nuns in Bhutan. I am particularly interested in nuns' access to education, either monastic or secular and to discern whether patriarchal elements are present in the monastic institutions of Bhutan and how these elements determine the place of nuns in religious practice. It is also my intention to analyse whether nuns are financially dependent on male monastic institutions and if there are elements of subordination of nuns by monks or any kind of discrimination which inhibits nuns' roles, practices and their rights as equal members of the Buddhist clergy.

The overall purpose of my doing this dissertation on the Bhutanese nuns is to give the nuns a platform to tell their life stories. Since they have been invisible from the advent of Buddhism in Bhutan, I believe that the time is ripe for social change which can only be possible if there is a credible and rich academic study on the nuns which will shed light on why nuns have remained invisible to this day and why they should not remain invisible anymore. I plan to utilise the results of this study to highlight to the Bhutanese government and monastic institutions in Bhutan the issues surrounding both lay and monastic women in Bhutan as highlighted in this academic work, with a view to invoke policy changes on women and religious practice in the country.

1.4 Significance and Originality

This thesis provides new knowledge on the history of gender roles in Buddhist practice and the role of contemporary female Buddhist practitioners in Bhutan. The scholarship on gender roles in Bhutan is scarce. *The Journal of Bhutan Studies*, since its inception in 2000, has not published a single article related to gender roles and discrimination of

women. The only work by Bhutanese writers to date which sheds light on gender roles in Bhutan is that of Chöden (2005) in her novel, *The Circle of Karma*. There is a scholarly article, i.e. an encyclopaedia by Mitra and Kumar (2004) published in India which provides a broad description of women in Bhutan, but there is little mention of nuns and their socio-religious role, their issues and their interaction with the larger Bhutanese society. While there are isolated studies on gendered roles in religious practice in Bhutan focusing specifically on Bhutanese nuns and gender discrimination, all these studies (Wikan, 1996; Crins, 2008; Zangmo, 2009) are cross-sectional, conducted during rapid field visits and not over a prolonged period of fieldwork.

Nuns are mentioned in passing in religious biographies and hagiographies (Tib⁶: *rnam-thar*), histories (Tib: *chojung*) and oral stories (Tib: *drung*) but there is yet to be an analysis on the role of nuns in religious practice in Bhutan. There are published works on sexual abuse of nuns in Bhutan and the post-modern dilemma of an old nun in Bhutan (Wikan, 1996) but it stops short of analysing the roles of younger nuns in Bhutan. Most scholarship on Buddhist women in Bhutan is based on either textual analysis (Aris, 1986) or cross-sectional studies of women (Wikan, 1996; Crins, 2008; Zangmo, 2009). Although there have been in-depth studies of the role of nuns in religious practice elsewhere in the Himalayas, e.g. an ethnographical analysis of the lives of Buddhist nuns in Zangskar (Gutschow, 2004), similar scholarship is lacking in Bhutan. Bhutan is generally overshadowed by the spotlight on Tibet. Travel literature of the British East India Company officers omits the existence of nuns in Bhutan. Thus, the exclusion of Bhutanese nuns from modern Buddhist scholarship is due to oversight as much as to oblivion. My thesis is significant as it attempts to correct the imbalance between the narratives on male and female religious personalities in Bhutan, providing knowledge on the lives and contributions of Bhutanese nuns. This research endeavours to fill the gaps

⁶ Note that the abbreviation Tib. refers to Tibetan and Skt. refers to Sanskrit. Wherever terms are similar between Tibetan and Dzongkha, the abbreviation Tib. is used. Dzongkha is only mentioned when the term differs from the Tibetan language.

by analysing the social differentiation in terms of religious practice, with particular emphasis on Bhutanese nuns.

There is much literature and critique on monastic education in Bhutan e.g. (Phuntsho, 2005; Wangyal, 2005; Dorje, 2005; Denman and Namgyel, 2008) but only Denman and Namgyel (2008) mentioned nuns' education, with only one paragraph attributed to nuns in terms of lack of support of private nunneries providing monastic education to nuns. The other articles focused only on monks' education. Phuntsho (2005) conducted a comparative study between traditional education, i.e. monastic (religious) education and secular education (modern education in English). He analysed the history of monastic education in Bhutan and the future trend of monastic education and the corresponding impact on traditional education posed by modern education. However, Phuntsho's work did not consider nuns' monastic education at all, which is hardly surprising since nuns lack access to monastic education in Bhutan. Only Penjore (2007), in his analysis of Bhutanese folktales and education described the lack of nun's access to monastic education.

Serious literature on nuns in Bhutan began with the work of Zangmo (2009) followed by her compilation of a report on investing in nuns as agents of social change via the Bhutan Nuns Foundation (2011). The most recent literature on Bhutanese nuns is a compilation of information on nunneries and eminent nuns of Bhutan by Wangmo (2013). This guidebook on the nunneries in both English and the national language, Dzongkha is the first of its kind in Bhutan and provides the much needed information on the profile of all the nunneries in Bhutan, twenty-six altogether. According to Wangmo (2013), there were only three nunneries in the whole of Bhutan in 1982; Kila Dechen Yangtse in Paro, Jachung Karmo in Punakha and Karma Drupdey Palmo Chokyi Dingkhang in Tongsa (Wangmo, 2013). At present, there are twenty-six nunneries including both government and private supported nunneries as opposed to a total of 207 government supported

monastic institutions⁷ (Bhutan Nuns Foundation, 2011).

Zangmo's (2009) study on Bhutanese nuns is closely linked to my study as it focused on nuns' education and their contribution to Gross National Happiness (GNH). The main theme of the study was to understand the role of nuns and nunneries in education in order to integrate Bhutanese nuns into the mainstream agenda of the Bhutan's development goals. My study, on the other hand, focuses on gendered roles in religious practice with emphasis on the reasons for Bhutanese nuns' lack of access to education which subsequently renders them to a subordinate position. The higher purpose of my study is to improve the lives of Bhutanese nuns to be able to progress better in their spiritual practice if they have access to education. Although Zangmo also adopted the Eastern and Western Bhutan approach and selected four nunneries in her study, her research methodology was cross-sectional, spending at most, two days for each visit. In comparison, my study employs ethnography which demanded longer-term fieldwork, i.e. two months in each nunnery. Zangmo interviewed only two nuns per nunnery whereas my research methodology entailed interviewing at least fifteen nuns from each nunnery and prolonged participant observation. I have an added advantage over Zangmo, not only in terms of the duration of my fieldwork, but also in terms of access to the nuns' private lives as I am a nun. Zangmo (2009) could not study the nuns on a deeper level partly because she is not a nun, impeding her full participation in the daily lives of the nuns, for which I was privileged to do. Therefore, in view of the past literature on women and nuns in Bhutan, I believe that my thesis is original in the following ways:

1. It provides new knowledge on gender roles in institutional Buddhism in Bhutan and the role of contemporary female Buddhist practitioners in Bhutan to bridge the gap in scholarship on Bhutanese nuns. There are no studies to date to understand gendered

⁷ Excluding private and village temples

roles and the sources of gender discrimination/inequality in religious practice in Bhutan from a combined historical and contemporary perspective. Scholarship on Bhutanese nuns, especially on education, is extremely scarce.

2. There are no prior ethnographical studies on gendered roles in Buddhist religious practice in Bhutan: While there are isolated studies on gendered roles in Buddhist religious practice in Bhutan focusing specifically on Bhutanese nuns and gender discrimination, all these studies are cross-sectional. There are no ethnographical studies on this topic which can provide deeper insights into the role of female practitioners, especially nuns in Bhutan.

1.5 Theoretical Framework—the Ground of the Research: Feminist Buddhist and Post-structuralism

I have chosen to ground my thesis in feminist theory in combination with poststructuralist thought to deconstruct the dualistic notions of men/women and gendered roles in Bhutan. I have adopted the feminist perspective, specifically the Feminist Buddhist approach as the basic framework for understanding the role of Bhutanese nuns in religious practice and the root of discrimination, especially in terms of access to monastic and secular education. In general, the Feminist Buddhist approach entails a “critical analysis of Buddhist texts, we can determine the ways that women are supported and the ways they are repressed by the institutional structures of Buddhism” (Kabilsingh, 1991: 22). Feminist Buddhist approaches demonstrate how men are privileged over women (in the case of this thesis, nuns) and a hierarchy is formed in the monastic institutions. This hierarchy translates into unequal power relationship between nuns and monks which results in the subordination of nuns by monks and loss of opportunities for nuns in terms of monastic education and spiritual practice.

I have primarily utilised feminist ethnography to understand gendered roles in religious practice in Bhutan and the corresponding sources of these deeply entrenched gendered roles and insights into the vicious hierarchy of monks over nuns to understand the reasons why nuns are unable to secure equal access to monastic/secular education as their monk counterparts and how this loss of educational opportunity has translated into further subordination, poverty and lack of spiritual training.

In this thesis, I highlighted the masculine ideal and the lowly esteemed femininity which puts monks on a pedestal as leaders and teachers and nuns in a subordinate position as 'rookie' *samgha* which is constructed by the patriarchal monastic institution in Bhutan. According to Gross (1996), women undergo suffering as a result of gendered roles and she argues for the elimination of gender roles altogether in order to pave the way for gender equality as a means of countering injustice to women. The fact that men and women are forced to fit into society and play pre-determined roles imposed by society on the basis of their physiological sex does grave injustice to women, in particular, and even men.

In order to negate gender roles, one must first negate the very concept of man and woman, which is why poststructuralist feminist approach fits perfectly. Poststructuralist feminists reject traditional definitions of woman imposed by men and question the possibility of defining women at all, and I quote Simone de Beauvoir, "Are thee women?" This process, referred to as deconstruction by poststructuralists involves breaking down traditional notions about women by analysing beyond the confines of traditional biases and assumptions of the patriarchal language. Various Feminist Buddhist scholars focus on core Buddhist concepts, e.g. "egolessness (Skt: *anātman*), "emptiness" (Skt: *śūnyatā*), and Buddhature (Skt: *tathāgatagarbha*) to demonstrate how these teachings negate the dualistic notions of male/female to the human experience, thereby, deconstructing the notion of fixed gender roles as a concrete reality in Buddhist practice.

From the Buddhist point of view, deconstructing dualistic notions is the main path to enlightenment. According to Buddhist teachings, the dualistic impulse is deeply embedded in the human psyche, which traps beings in cyclic existence (Skt: *samsāra*). This dualistic impulse is explained by the Buddhist concept of emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*) based on Ārya Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamaka philosophy (Kalupahana, 1991) which states that the so-called 'reality' which ordinary beings perceive is merely conventionally labelled (conventional/relative truth). Ultimately, nothing in this world exists inherently and everything, including self and phenomena exists by way of causes and conditions (ultimate truth). Therefore, at the relative level, there appears the notion of subject and object but at the ultimate level, these notions completely disappear since nothing exists inherently, therefore, there cannot be a subject or an object in the realm of emptiness. Hence, the concept of "dualism" in Buddhist practice refers to the pre-occupation of the mind which views all phenomena in dichotomies, e.g. subject and object, sacred and profane, or enlightened and unenlightened (Klein, 1995).

This doctrine of *śūnyatā* should not be perceived as nihilism in that nothing in this world exists at all. What is meant by *śūnyatā* is that things exist merely as labelled phenomena, not inherently. The pre-occupation of the mind to grasp at a perceived concretely existing 'self' and phenomena is rooted in a mental defilement called ignorance which fails to perceive the emptiness of self and phenomena. This intense self-grasping, which according to the Buddha, is deeply etched in sentient beings' mindstream since beginningless (primordial) time is the root cause of suffering and bounds sentient beings to cyclic existence. In order to escape from cyclic existence, one has to drop all notions of self and phenomena through systematic meditation on emptiness which is the goal of the Vajrayāna Buddhist practice.

Adopting the poststructuralist feminist framework to complement the findings from ethnography, I have attempted to deconstruct male and female categories in such a way

as to lose their opposition to one another (nondualism). The task at hand was not only to reconstruct basic symbols (e.g. the less potent, impure female body, *ḍākinī* symbolism or the ever present phallic symbol in Bhutan) but to demonstrate that the core teachings of Buddhism cannot be used to justify Buddhism's male-dominant forms.

Feminist Buddhist scholars such as Aziz (1987) and Klein (1995) cautioned on the tendency to generalise the lives of women in Tibet based on the egalitarian symbol, such as that of the *ḍākinī*. Indeed the *ḍākinī* symbol of Vajrayāna Buddhism corresponds to the post-structural ideal of non-dualism and hence is a symbol of egalitarianism in Buddhist practice. In contrast, the lives of Tibetan women are far from egalitarian as will be discussed in Chapter Four despite the seemingly egalitarian way women are portrayed in certain Vajrayāna Buddhist symbolism. Simmer-Brown (2002) suggested that to responsibly analyse and interpret gender issues in the religious realm, three kinds of phenomena must be distinguished—1) tenets or doctrines, 2) social institutions, and 3) systems of symbol and ritual. Doctrinal Buddhism often promotes egalitarianism in spiritual practice and attaining enlightenment but institutional patriarchy often contrasts these doctrines by denouncing the inherent spiritual capabilities of women Buddhist practitioners. As will be discussed further in Chapter Two, the institutional structures, hierarchy and authorization of teachers, monastic education, textual scholarship and ritual specialization have often excluded women (Simmer-Brown, 2002). Misogynist attitudes towards women abound in Buddhist texts and institutional Buddhism which will also be discussed at length in Chapter Two. Yet, core Buddhist teachings consistently preach the same message of egalitarianism, i.e. women have equal potential as men for enlightenment and that in the ultimate realm, gender is irrelevant. Much has been discussed about the doctrinal aspects of Buddhism in the gender debate. Therefore, my thesis focuses primarily on the actual religious lives of Bhutanese women, symbol and ritual within Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan to deconstruct prevailing gender bias in

institutionalised Buddhism in Bhutan on the inherent ability of the female practitioner to attain enlightenment to demonstrate that gender is ultimately irrelevant in religious practice.

1.6 Lens on the Nuns—Why Ethnography and Feminist Methodology?

Feminism insists that women must be given their proper place as equal members of the human race. In order to minimise the objectification of women as research participants, the usage of qualitative, historical, and other methodologies that highlight women's oppressions are necessary (Ollenburger and Moore, 1998). To achieve this goal, this research employs the qualitative research method which is oriented toward recognising the multifaceted interpretations of the Bhutanese nuns' experience, and the iterative relation within social and cultural systems. Therefore, the adoption of qualitative research in this study is necessary as the research involves studying indigenous peoples, their culture and their religion adopted from a foreign land.

Feminist methodology can be understood as the application of feminist principles to scientific research (Ollenburger and Moore, 1998: 67). Feminism came as a response to the subordination of women in almost all spheres of life. Feminism aims to break away from the vicious cycle of gendered roles which keeps women enslaved in traditional female roles such as mothering, nurturing and taking care of the family (cooking, cleaning etc.) and also unpaid labour. Since this study focuses on gendered roles in Buddhist practice in Bhutan which aims to explore not only gendered roles, but the sources of gender stereotypes in the religious environment in Bhutan with a view of breaking down traditional stereotypes about women; feminist methodology is the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study. In adopting feminist methodology as the theoretical paradigm, this thesis closely adheres to Sarah Harding's three-point strategy in that:

1. The research problem is not separate from the purpose and consequences of this research which is both an academic study of Bhutanese nuns as well as a social vision;
2. The researcher is not distinctly different from the research participants, "that is, the class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviours of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint" (Harding, 1987: 9).⁸ In the case of this research, I, the researcher am a Bhutanese nun who has lived in both Eastern and Western Bhutan and understands the cultural differences between these two regions and personally identifies with the research participants as comrades in religious practice. Therefore, my personal subjectivity is not dismissed from this thesis which will include my beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour; and
3. This thesis incorporates the full range of Bhutanese women's experiences, taking into consideration differences in class and racial groups (Eastern and Western Bhutan, urban and rural society).

Feminist methodology entails casting out pejorative overtones about women in academic writings and a re-evaluation of works which thrust women into insignificance. The objectification of women is a core basis for feminism and feminist methodology, especially the poststructuralist feminist framework in this thesis which breaks down the dichotomies between stereotyped gender roles, the notion of male and female, masculine and feminine. In traditional scholarship, including Buddhist studies, men are regarded as "normal" and women as "other". All these dichotomies imply that men are inherently powerful whereas women lack power (Wallston, 1985). Feminism empowers women through a redistribution of power whereby women are no longer insignificant objects of

⁸Cited in Ollenburger and Moore (1998)

research, “needing to be explained and fitted in somewhere, having the same epistemological and ontological status as trees, unicorns, deities, and other objects that must be discussed to make experience intelligible” (Gross, 1996: 20).

1.6.1 Personal Subjectivity

Feminist researchers challenge claims to objectivity and neutrality which form the basis of the traditional model of science, which tend to obscure the lives and experiences of women (Benston, 1982)⁹. Feminist writers like (Wallston, 1985: 227)¹⁰ and (Gross, 1996: 13) reject claims of objectivity in women’s studies, arguing that “The study of religion can never be value-free because the very existence of the discipline depends on this value.” This argument is supported by Francine Blau (Blau and Jusenius, 1976)¹¹, who observed that there are three areas of research which are inevitably influenced by values, i.e. in the selection of the problems to be studied, the research methodology employed and the interpretation of the findings.

Feminist theologians daringly assert that the words and concepts of religion come from ordinary human lives and not from extra-human divine sources. Thus, valid theology is not limited to a small group of humans but based on all humans’ experiences. Gross (1996) therefore explains how one’s formative experiences help shape one’s theological outlooks. Gross (2009) advocates the study of contemporary Buddhism that includes personal experience of the Buddhist lifestyle, which she asserts should be admitted into the academic arena, thereby paving the way for a personal dimension in academic studies which enriches the scholarship and the same time, an acknowledgement of one’s own biasness and tendencies.

⁹ Cited in Ollenburger and Moore (1998)

¹⁰ -Ibid-

¹¹ Cited in Ollenburger and Moore (1998)

Feminist methodology is very appropriate for this study as the problem statement of this thesis stems from my personal experience of being a nun in Bhutan with no access to monastic studies. Being denied the opportunity to study Buddhist philosophy in my home country, I had to travel to Dharamsala, India, a journey of four days and three nights, alternating between trains and buses to study at a non-sectarian nunnery institute initiated by a Western nun who herself had no opportunity to study the teachings of the Buddha in-depth; a right accorded by the Buddha himself but forfeited by monks for reasons which will be uncovered in this thesis.

The data collection methodologies employed in this research include elements of personal subjectivity (Lughod, 1990; Klein, 1995; Gross, 1996) as I am a Buddhist nun who is conducting participant observation on other Bhutanese Buddhist nuns. Far from being detached from the research subjects/participants, I am of the same ethnic origin as most of the nuns, speak the same language, am a citizen of the same country and understand the life of a nun and the difficulties faced by the research subjects as I have undergone thirteen years of monastic training in a nunnery institute. However, it must be noted that my background differs significantly from the research subjects in terms of socio-economic background, secular schooling opportunities and exposure to the outside world.

In endorsing the inevitable personal subjectivity in my research, I draw upon Gross' (2009) assertion that rather than pretending to be objective, it would be a better strategy to minimize biasness. I acknowledge my personal subjectivity from the onset of the thesis so that the findings, debates and discussions will be understood in its proper context.

1.6.2 Ethnography

Methodological pluralism is also one of the core concerns in feminist research. Traditional androcentric sociology has reinforced biased views of women and

inadequately project women as silent research objects of minor importance to be fitted marginally in academic writings, thereby distorting the knowledge base. Cultural feminists emphasise heavily on the need to analyse women's everyday reality and provide an accurate picture of a society which is formed by both male and female members. The Collective¹² (1983) recommends that research must incorporate women's lives in their own words; and an analysis of the full spectrum of women's social conditions such as politics, education, race and ethnicity etc. instead of limiting the scope of inquiry only to traditional stereotyped roles of women such as marriage, family or reproductive roles (Lughod, 1990).

Generally, feminist Buddhists who examined the obstacles placed before women interested in practicing the spiritual path set forth by the historical Buddha (Kabilsingh, 1991) used critical analysis of Buddhist texts to show how women are supported and subdued by the institutional structures of Buddhism. Other feminist Buddhists like Gross (2009) observed that the religious lives of women were fully ignored in the academic study of religion, resulting in inaccurate portrayal of a religion and women's role in religion. For example, male androcentric scholars understood Hinduism through their Christian idea of what religion should be, i.e. text-based instead of a living religion. This is how Indian Hindu women were excluded from discussions on Hinduism as these women did not fit in the text-based dimension in Hinduism. Nevertheless, Indian women play a major role in Hindu religious ceremonies and are instrumental in the preservation of Hinduism. To this Gross criticises androcentric scholarship that these scholars who champion objectivity and neutrality were themselves not protected from their own subjectivity. Gross further added that since it is inevitable that personal subjectivity will influence scholarship, therefore, it would be better if scholars readily admit instead of denying their own subjectivity in their writings.

¹²The Nebraska Sociological Feminist Collective (1983) in Ollenburger & Moore (1998).

Gross's views on the academic study of religion echo my reasons for employing ethnography to study the religious lives of nuns in Bhutan in its natural surroundings. Gross emphasises the need to explore various possible ways than our own to think, live, and practice religion so as to broaden our horizon to avoid the narrow-minded approach to academic research. Therefore, I have attempted to study Bhutanese women as religious subjects in their own right, not merely as objects in a religious world constructed by men. Since women are sidelined in Buddhist texts either by early Indian Buddhist or later Western scholars, it is important to go beyond textual dimensions of a religious tradition in order to have deeper insights into women's religious lives. Hence, this study utilised ethnography as the main method of research to move beyond traditional scholarship on women in Buddhism which is largely text-based. This research incorporates the full voices of sampled Bhutanese nuns through interviews and focus group discussions. Women in my thesis, especially the nuns have been able to tell their stories about their daily lives and paint their own reality.

1.7 The Research Setting

The main subjects in this research are the Bhutanese nuns, a collective unit of ordained Bhutanese women who live in a community in a complex called a nunnery. According to Zangmo (2009) and Wangmo (2013), there are twenty-six nunneries in Bhutan, with an estimated population of slightly over one thousand nuns. In this thesis, two nunneries were studied, one in the Eastern and the other in the Western portion of Bhutan. The nunnery in the west, Jachung Karmo Nunnery, a government-run nunnery is situated in Punakha while the nunnery in the east is called Jashar Goenpa, located in Pemagatshel is a private-run nunnery.

The rationale for selecting the two regions is that these two regions have the largest concentration of monastic institutions, including nunneries. Moreover, the Western and

Eastern parts of Bhutan have distinctly different languages, ethnic groups and are mutually exclusive in religious affairs. Therefore, a comparison between the nunneries from very distinct regions is essential to provide a broader picture on the actual situation of Bhutanese nuns without resorting to sweeping generalisations.

In addition, I, the research candidate am a Bhutanese citizen, and a Vajrayāna Buddhist nun who speaks the languages of both Western and Eastern Bhutan. I also bring into this research my early formative years in Eastern Bhutan where I was born and schooled until age eight and my adolescent years in the Western region, where I lived until I went to India to pursue my monastic studies at the age of sixteen.

Each field visit was two months for each nunnery, with a total of four months on a continuous basis of field research. The fieldwork in Jachung Karmo Nunnery was from mid-August to mid October 2012 and Jashar Goenpa from late October to late December 2012. Weather and various challenges such as unwillingness of the nunnery authorities to give full cooperation towards my research as well as other bureaucracy and financial issues determined the length of the fieldwork in both nunneries. Subsequent visits to Bhutan in late 2013, 2014 and 2015 re-confirmed many of my observations made in the field as well as provided necessary updates to several dimensions in my thesis.

In general, there are two sets of research subjects in this thesis—internal and external i.e. monastic and lay Bhutanese (refer to Table 1.1: 32). There are two categories of internal subjects which are analysed, the first comprise the nuns from a government and private-run nunneries respectively, with occasional inputs from home-based nuns and the second category comprises monks from either a government or private-run monastery and home-based monks.

The key internal research subjects were the nuns whose daily lives were studied in-depth, whom I stayed with. Key internal subjects were mainly important monastic figures such as incarnate masters, teachers, discipline master, chanting master and administrative

staff. The external research subjects are lay Bhutanese men and women, regardless of their status in society. The external subjects were non-monastic, i.e. laypeople who have either working or spiritual relations with the two nunneries studied. The respondents were sampled based on the following prescription (see Table 1.1: 32):

1. Full sampling for the lay community members who visited the two nunneries during my fieldwork or random sampling of lay local community members who were available and agreeable to be interviewed.
2. Nuns: At least fifty per cent of the total number of nuns in both nunneries.
3. Monks: All teachers who are residing in the nunneries and other randomly sampled monks who were willing to be interviewed.

Table 1.1: A summary of sampled population for the study

Type of respondents	Number sampled
Nuns (Jachung Karmo Nunnery)	12 (22) ¹³
Nuns (Jashar Goenpa)	16 (30)
Nuns (General/home-based)	3
Monks	6
Laymen	5
Laywomen	4

1.8 Data Collection Methodology

The main methodology employed in this ethnographic research is participant observation. The research employed an array of additional data collection methodologies such as interviews, focus group discussions and daily activities survey of the nuns in the two nunneries to facilitate understanding of the worldview of the various actors of this study, namely, nuns, monks, laymen and laywomen. Secondary data are relevant Buddhist texts/scriptures/biographies/hagiographies used in Bhutan, specifically the Tibetan (Vajrayāna) Buddhist Mahāyāna sutras and commentaries, subsequently analysed to trace gendered roles in Buddhist practice as well as the root of women's subordination/discrimination in the religious realm.

¹³ Figures in parentheses show the total number of nuns residing at the nunnery at the time of the study.

1.8.1 Participant observation

I fully participated in the daily activities of the nuns in the two nunneries studied. I gained entry into the two nunneries through personal contacts with the nuns of the respective nunneries. The nunneries are government and private nunneries run by high *lamas*¹⁴ or *rinpoches*¹⁵ respectively. I obtained a very deep level of understanding of the social dynamics of the community of nuns and their relationship with the local community and monks which provided me with a basis for understanding gendered roles in Buddhist practice and the limitations in accessing monastic and secular education for the nuns (see Appendix A).

I participated in mundane activities such as daily work in the nunnery (chores such as cleaning and arranging the offerings) as well as spiritual activities such as performing daily prayers, meditation, prayers for the sick and deceased. This level of participation enabled me to gain the trust and respect of the nuns and the local community.

The main advantage of this method is that research is conducted in a natural setting, unlike other techniques employed in this study, which gave me a clearer and less orchestrated account of what is really happening in the nunnery and the surrounding local community and the conditions which influenced events. Being a full participant first and a secondary observer is a good way to blend in with the community, so that the notion of 'outsider' is eroded among the nuns and local community. One can observe while participating at the same time. Moreover, I had first-hand experience with participants and noticed things ordinary observers failed to see. Therefore, I am able to confirm that a certain practice is conducted by the nuns/monks/villagers. The experience and knowledge gained from full participation is difficult for an ordinary observer conducting only cross-sectional research to obtain.

¹⁴Refers to a spiritual teacher

¹⁵Refers to an incarnate master (Tib: *trulku*)

1.8.2 Interviews

In-depth interviews include both individual interviews as well as group interviews. The in-depth interviews were structured, unstructured and semi-structured (refer to Appendix B). Structured interviews were conducted using a set of questionnaires to gain an understanding of the general socio-economic characteristics of each sampled individual and perceptions on issues relating to gender roles, religious practices, ordination, education for women etc. The questionnaire, prepared in both English and the national language (Dzongkha), was administered orally on an individual. The questionnaire was administered mainly to the three categories of respondents: nuns, monks and laypeople.

Data elicited from semi-structured interviews pertains to the local community belief systems, perceptions and general attitudes towards nuns, monks, male/female, gender stereotypes, the importance of education and many other aspects of their daily life which rigid questionnaires would not be able to capture. Nuns and monks were interviewed through this semi-structured interview in terms of their relationship with the local communities, description of the nunneries, the nuns' duties, difficulties, etc.

Unstructured interviews were conducted to obtain information which just cropped up during informal conversational interviews or local events/ceremonies, i.e. without any predetermined set of questions; instead the interviewees and I talked freely (Burgess, 1991b). The uncovering of oral narratives or other non-verbal art such as story, proverb, poetry, drama and song, more specifically, in the Bhutanese context, verbal art includes “*srung* (folktales), *dpegtam* or *dpyegtam* (proverb), *gtamrgyud* (legend), *bloze* (ballad), *tsangmo* (equivalent of quatrain), *gabtsbig* (riddle), and *dgodbra* (joke)” (Penjore D. , 2007).

1.8.3 Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

Powell et al. (1996) define a focus group as a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss from personal experience a specific topic provided by the researcher. A focus group differs from a group interview as it relies more on group interaction based on a topic provided by the researcher rather than individual interviews within the group (Morgan and Lawton, 1996). Focus group discussions (FGD) involve organised discussions with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences pertaining to the survey. The FGD was essential to this study because it is suitable for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic. Focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context (Merton and Kendall, 1946). Moreover, a larger amount of information was gained in a shorter period of time which is especially useful during a rapid assessment. FGD also proved to be a method for validating the data from other data collection techniques in this study, especially for triangulation (Morgan, 1988).

1.8.4 Documentary analysis

Documentary analysis is an unobtrusive data collection measure and serves as a supplementary, not a primary source of data (Baker, 1988). The primary documents analysed in this study are canonical and non-canonical Vajrayāna Buddhist texts (e.g. religious biographies). These include historical records of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan which shed light on the lives of women and gendered roles in religious practice of the past that is both accurate and usable in order to find out if dominance is normal, appropriate, omnipresent, and unalterable, paving the way to challenge contemporary gender norms. Another genre of documents is known as hagiography (Tib: *rnam-thar*). A *rnam-thar* is the annalistic account of the life of the Buddha or of a *bodhisattva*; the hearing of each (Tib: *rnam-pa*) word and its mental comprehension causes a seed of

enlightenment (Tib: *thar-pa*) to be sown. The lives of kings, ministers, ordinary men and women are referred to as annals (Tib: *lo-rgyus*) or tales (Tib: *sgrungs*), never as hagiographies.

Documentary analysis is also used to find attitudes towards women in the texts as to whether they are androcentric, misogynist or promote the empowerment of women in Bhutan as well as to find forgotten contributions by women and forgotten female imagery in Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan in order to be able to rewrite female history in Bhutan.

1.8.5 Daily Activities Survey

The daily activities survey is based on survey research methodology. This methodology was adapted from Gomes' (2004) daily records on time allocation for various activities of the Orang Asli Semai in a village in the Upper Batang Padang river valley in the State of Perak, Malaysia. Another study of the Orang Asli Jakun in Kampung Simpai, Bebar District, Pahang, Malaysia (Gill, 2008) experimented with the idea of letting the Orang Asli keep a journal of their daily activities to obtain information about their consumption patterns, daily activities and resource use etc. This study essentially adopts the same method of logging. However, the logging was an exploration of the Bhutanese nuns' daily activity patterns in order to understand their daily activities to gauge whether the nuns have time to pursue higher spiritual activities instead of being confined to doing productive work for their basic survival. This logging was based on the number of hours spent daily on certain specified activities. Among the dimensions captured are time spent on religious practice, leisure hours, nunnery and family-related chores. Monk-related chores: i.e. the number of hours individual nuns spent on providing labour for the monks (usually male teachers) in exchange for religious instructions was also captured.

The essential idea of the daily activities pattern log sheet is to see the daily activity patterns of the nuns for a period of thirty days. The log sheet consists of rows which list down the activities and columns which represent the days (see Appendix I). The daily activities amounted to a total of 24 hours in a day.

A summary of the research objectives, research questions and data collection methodology is presented in Table 1.2 as follows:

Table 1.2: A summary of research objectives, research questions, and the data collection methodology adopted in the study

Objectives	Research questions	Research Methodology	Specific Data Collected
1. To gauge the level of empowerment of Vajrayāna Buddhist nuns in Bhutan in religious practice, especially in terms of monastic education;	1. Are the Bhutanese nuns sufficiently empowered to be able to practice the Vajrayāna Buddhist spiritual path and attain realizations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Participant observation; - Structured and semi-structured interviews with key informants; -Focus group interviews; - Perception study using questionnaire (interviews); -Daily activities survey - Oral histories, dance, poetry, drawing and mapping. -Documentary Analysis, secondary data, i.e. analysis of Buddhist texts, religious biographies and historical documents from the Bhutan National Archives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Power differences in the relationship between the monks/nuns, higher ranking nuns/ordinary nuns, laymen and laywomen in the household, villagers and the village elite etc. -Kinship, relationship within the nunnery/local community and outsiders (e.g. government agencies, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations etc.) - Daily practices of the nuns and daily activities of the laypeople (local communities)/community practices. - Religious ceremonies, e.g. prayers (<i>pūjās</i>) and the meaning of religious activities to the nuns/laywomen. - How women leaders are chosen. - Great Buddhist women in Bhutan/local area. - How Bhutanese women perceive and cope with the inferior status to which they are often assigned, including how their perceptions differ from or agree with those of other women. - How Bhutanese women's experience and understanding of Vajrayāna Buddhism may deviate from or be consonant with men's understanding of that same tradition. - Aspirations of nuns and local community

Table 1.2: A summary of research objectives, research questions, and the data collection methodology adopted in the study (Continued)

<p>2. To analyse the role of Bhutanese nuns in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with;</p>	<p>2. Do Bhutanese nuns play a role in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The role of nuns, monks, laymen, laywomen and children in the community. - Daily practices of the nuns and daily activities of the laypeople (local communities)/community practices. - Religious ceremonies, e.g. prayers (<i>pūjās</i>) and the meaning of religious activities to the nuns/laywomen. - How women leaders are chosen - Great Buddhist women in Bhutan/local area. - Perceptions on gendered roles in the family, public sphere and monastic institution. -Perceptions of local communities/nuns on threats to local community stability/nuns well-being. - How Bhutanese women perceive and cope with the inferior status to which they are often assigned, including how their perceptions differ from or agree with those of other women. - Aspirations of nuns and local community
<p>3. To analyse the traditions, practices, scriptures, and symbolism of Vajrayāna Buddhism that support women's empowerment and those that do not in order to understand the key factors which contribute to gender discrimination in religious practice in Bhutan.</p>	<p>3. What are the aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhist institutionalism, traditions, practices, scriptures, and symbolism in Bhutan that support women's empowerment and those that do not?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Power differences in the relationship between the monks/nuns, higher ranking nuns/ordinary nuns, laymen and laywomen in the household, villagers and the village elite etc. - Verbal art- folktales, proverbs, legends, ballad, riddles and jokes. - Rites of passage: primarily birth and death -Annual propitiation rituals, e.g. annual household <i>pūjā</i> or <i>choku</i> (prayer); religious events (e.g. masked dances, <i>tsechu</i> and <i>domchoe</i> etc.) -Understanding of whether tradition promotes an egalitarian or a sexist society. -Ordination procedures for nuns (<i>śramaṇerikā</i> ordination). -Whether men always dominated women in the study area. - Whether there a time when things were different, and women and men were more equal. - Understanding of how did male dominance come to be so common. - Physical objects and symbolism, e.g. Vajrayāna Buddhist ritual implements, art (<i>thangka</i>), <i>maṇḍala</i> etc. - Perceptions of laypeople on a sexed body. - Perceptions of nuns/monks on the sexed body, access to education/rites and rituals/gendered roles in religious practices, ordination, role in community. - Taboos and restrictions. -Documentary evidence: Canonical and non-canonical Vajrayāna Buddhist texts (e.g. religious biographies), historical records of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan and female imagery in Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan.

1.9 Scope of Study and Organisation of Thesis

The elision of nuns from literature on Bhutan has produced a gap in literature which this research intends to fill by analysing gendered roles in religious practice in Bhutan. This study reviews the roles and images of women in early Buddhism, Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism and specifically, Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism to see how ideas of "woman" and "female" have been constructed. In the Bhutanese context, it required reanalyzing the historic records and Buddhist practices that have excluded or subordinated women.

The roles of Bhutanese nuns in propagating and sustaining Buddhism in their country is explored to gauge the relevance of their contribution to Bhutan's vision of a nation grounded in the sustainable principles of Gross National Happiness. The nuns' roles in the monastic institutions as well as larger Bhutanese society sheds light on the level of empowerment of women.

This thesis contains six chapters, excluding the Introduction and Conclusion chapters. The first chapter has dealt with the history of a country in transition, progressing in various arenas. Yet, the nuns are invisible and their voices have been suppressed for generations. This thesis has thus far highlighted the importance of conducting research on Bhutanese nuns, the rationale of the research and the various data collection methodologies employed in this research.

The second chapter is devoted to Feminism and Buddhism, which consist of a discussion on feminist theology and a review of Buddhist doctrines and texts to gauge how women are portrayed in Buddhism. I have highlighted the multiplicity of Buddhist attitudes towards women (from early Buddhist literature) to demonstrate that there is disjuncture between Buddhist doctrines and its treatment of women and that there is no single Buddhist attitude towards women. A general overview of the academic study of religion coupled with Feminist analysis of religions ensues, which is a general discussion on androcentric tendencies in writings on women in religion and how Feminist Buddhist

analysis is employed to overcome androcentricism in Buddhist studies. A review of feminist literature by early female or feminist Buddhist scholars follows the discussion on Buddhist attitudes towards women in order to understand the evolution of feminist writings on Buddhism. I have focused on the writings of three 19th century women writers; Horner, Mabel and Rhys-Davis on Buddhism and demonstrate how their works have shaped Buddhist feminist literature today. Of particular interest are elements of Orientalism, Protestant Buddhism and Doctrinal Buddhism which had impacted the way Buddhism was introduced to the West from the works of these early Western writers.

An overview of Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan forms the core theme of Chapter Three. The chapter begins with a discussion on the geo-political scenario of contemporary Bhutan. This is followed by a discussion on the history of Vajrayāna Buddhism in general, i.e. how it was brought to Tibet. The next section specifically focuses on Vajrayāna Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan, stressing on the difference between Bhutanese Buddhism and Buddhism practiced in Tibet and other Vajrayāna Buddhist regions in the Himalayas. Elements of the three-tier traditional monastic education system in Bhutan are also introduced in this chapter.

The fourth chapter is a reflection of the *Buddhist Women of the Himalayas* which the Bhutanese nuns are also very much a part of. Here I introduced Himalayan Buddhist women and described their education opportunities, lifestyle, roles, pressures, positions, challenges and status. Included at the tail-end of this chapter is a discussion on the reasons for women ordaining as Buddhist nuns and what the life of a nun means to Buddhist women.

The fifth chapter, titled *Tales of Two Nunneries* walks the reader through the research setting and daily lives of the nuns in the two nunneries studied through the researcher's lens, a narrative from participant observation. Divided into two sections; the first focuses on myfield observations at Jachung Karmo Nunnery in Punakha and the second, on Jashar

Lhundrup Choling (Jashar Goenpa), Pema Gatshel. The chapter highlights the history of the nunneries, its founders and religious personalities related to nunnery. It also entails a detailed description of the lives of nuns, their personalities, roles and positions in the nunnery as well as interactions with their respective teachers and local communities.

Chapter Six, *Equality, Equanimity and Foregone Buddhist Principles* explores the extent of nuns' empowerment in religious practice and education, including retreat and opportunities given to them by the government or their gurus. It also features the narratives from two Bhutanese nuns from the two nunneries studied to appreciate their reasons for becoming Buddhist nuns and how they are coping as female renunciants. This chapter also covers a range of issues, e.g. nuns' level of empowerment in monastic education, nunnery management, self-confidence, ordination status and worldviews pertaining to the challenges they face as Buddhist nuns.

Chapter Seven, titled, *Religious Symbolism* is essentially an exploration of how religious/cultural symbols (e.g. female Buddhas, ritual implements or even the phallic symbol) serve to empower or disempower Bhutanese women, especially Bhutanese nuns. The impact of historical personalities such as Yeshe Tsogyal, Machig Lhabdron and Gelongma Palmo and contemporary female masters such as Anim Lopenma Paldon and Anim Trulku on the Bhutanese nuns in my two study areas and the role of the secret tantric seal practices in influencing or rather, perpetuating gendered roles in religious practice in Bhutan form a core focus at the tail-end of this thesis.

The Eighth and final chapter of the thesis revisits the objectives and research questions of this thesis. This chapter is essentially a summary of the major findings of this doctoral dissertation as per the research objectives and questions outlined in this thesis. The major conclusions which arise from each of the objectives is discussed, with reference to the theoretical framework of this thesis. Challenges faced during the course of this study as well as areas for future research conclude the entire thesis.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW—FEMINISM AND BUDDHISM

2.1 Feminist theology and Buddhist Feminism

Religion has always been a strong force in the lives of people. It gives people meaning, solace and strength to carry on through the various tribulations in life. However, religions have also been less accommodating to women as they become institutionalised. Over time, elements of patriarchy have crept into religion which influenced its members to adhere to religious rules which have had adverse effects on women. Women's place within the domestic sphere and men's place in the public domain became deeply entrenched in many religions (Gross, 1996).

Gross (1996) asserts that gendered roles are the root cause of suffering for both men and women. Men and women have often been placed by society in stereotyped gendered roles whereby men play the role of breadwinner and women, the housewives. Most narratives, ranging from children's books to official discourses depict this type of stereotyping, subconsciously embedding gendered roles deep within the psyche of human beings for centuries. According to Gross (1996) freedom from gender roles is the basis for gender equality. Therefore, feminists often contest stereotyped gender roles to break down the tyranny of traditional patriarchal structures which imprison both men and women, even in religious institutions.

According to Gross (1996), religions like Buddhism, Taoism and certain divisions within Hinduism, whose goal is individual liberation are less family-centric and provide alternative to women from their family role. These religions expound gender equality and its philosophy also contains numerous teachings on the "ultimate irrelevance of gender" (Gross, 1996: 92). Buddhism, for example, has a monastic institution (Skt: *samgha*), founded by the Buddha himself for both men and women to be free from the drudgery of family life and lay struggles in order to provide a conducive environment to practice the

teachings to be liberated from the cycle of births and deaths. However, these religions, which are theoretically rich in gender egalitarianism, are not entirely free from institutionalised male dominance. Despite its best intentions for women's liberation from stereotyped family roles, Buddhist practice has not been able to fully grant women their place within the *samgha* and other aspects of religious practice which are freely available to men. Women's subordination in a patriarchal monastic institution is only part of the discrimination faced by Buddhist women. There exist misogynistic elements in Buddhism which perpetuate the subordination of women (Gross, 1996). Women are excluded from higher ordination, leadership roles and ritual practices which contradict the basic tenets of Buddhism as a religion grounded on equanimity.

Feminist academics assert that the academic study of religion had consistently sidelined women. Feminist Buddhists such as Gross (2009) observed that the religious lives of women were fully ignored in the academic study of religion, resulting in inaccurate portrayal of a religion and women's role in religion. Theologians tended to understand eastern religions such as Hinduism through a Christian lens, thereby, excluding women from discussions on Hinduism since these women were not part of text-based Hinduism which includes the Vedas, Upanishads and Shastras. These women were erroneously disregarded in the academic study of Hinduism which resulted in a lop-sided portrayal of Hinduism as a centrally text-based religion. Nevertheless, contemporary theologians are now beginning to realise that Hindu women's role in religion has been grossly underestimated as these women are the fulcrum of living Hinduism today due to their major role in preserving Hindu religious ceremonies.

Gross (2009) further argued that by admitting the validity of diverse methods and encouraging them all, the study in religion has dramatically improved. For example, Hinduism is now discussed in major academic treatises more holistically, including both the textual and ceremonial aspect. She maintained that such viewpoints and perspectives

would definitely bring a broader and richer picture than any single angle of study. Feminist theologians daringly assert that the words and concepts of religion come from ordinary human lives and not from extra-human divine sources. Thus, valid theology is not limited to a small group of humans but based on all humans' experiences.

2.2 Buddhist Doctrines and the Effect on Women

Buddhist feminist writings are relatively underdeveloped compared to other theological traditions such as Christianity and Judaism that have produced a mass of literature on feminist theology (Gross, 1996). Scholars are still debating about the Buddhist attitudes towards women, whether Buddhism supports the empowerment of women or relegates women to a subordinate position. Various interpretations have been put forth which seem to reduce the Buddhist perspectives on and treatment of women to a dichotomy of either egalitarianism or discrimination. For example, Wilson (1996) in Gross (1996) selectively emphasised the negative portrayal of women in early and medieval Buddhism, rendering her work unbalanced while early female Buddhist writers such as Rhys Davids, Bode and Horner tended to portray the Buddha as pro-women and emphasised the egalitarian aspects of Buddhism. Sponberg (1992) on the other hand rejected these reductionist lines of inquiry, claiming that there are multiple perspectives of women in Buddhism, sometimes even within the same text.

Indeed, Buddhist literature has produced a range of discourses about women's ability to pursue the spiritual path to enlightenment as set forth by the Buddha (the relationship between sex and enlightenment); women's place in the monastic institution and how men and women view the female body. Therefore, it would certainly be overly simplistic to deduce that Buddhism is either for or against women. Such diverse views of women within Buddhist texts render it difficult to speak about "*the Buddhist attitude towards women*" (Sponberg, 1992: 28).

Sponberg (1992) thoroughly analysed the Pāli Canon, which is largely viewed by the Theravāda school of Buddhism as the oldest and closest to the historical Buddha's teaching, in search of the various perspectives on women. He invented a four-fold division of attitudes towards women; namely soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny. Soteriological inclusiveness refers to the fundamental early Buddhist attitude which holds that "one's sex, like one's caste or class (Skt: *varṇa*), presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering" (Sponberg, 1992: 8). Institutional androcentrism refers to "the view that women indeed may pursue a full-time religious career, but only within a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserves and reinforces the conventionally accepted social standards of male authority and female subordination" (Sponberg, 1992: 13). Sponberg termed antifeminine elements, mostly contributed by male ascetics (monks) as ascetic misogyny. The integration of femininity and masculinity within Buddhist practice are what Sponberg refers to as soteriological androgyny, which is a "new ideal of a dialectical androgyny [which] finds its fullest expression after the sixth century C.E. in the Vajrayāna literature of later Indo-Tibetan Buddhism" (Sponberg, 1992: 26).

The first three attitudes, found mainly in the Pāli Nikāyas and Āgamas developed simultaneously following the Buddha's passing away while soteriological androgyny is prevalent in later Mahāyāna literature. Sponberg's multiple views of women in Buddhism warrants further explanation which is discussed in the next section to provide a comprehensive picture of the diverse portrayals of women in early Buddhism.

2.2.1 Soteriological Inclusiveness: Can women become enlightened?

The Buddha declared that men and women have equal spiritual potential to attain liberation from *saṃsāra*. In the same vein, race, caste and social standing are not to be

taken as barriers to pursue the highest spiritual goal in Buddhism. This is what Sponberg (1992) refers to as soteriological inclusiveness. According to the Buddha, spiritual progress depends on the quality of one's actions rather than traits inherited at birth (Gross, 1996).

Theravāda Buddhism propounds four stages of sainthood, from stream-winners (*sotapanna*), once-returners (*sakadagami*), non-returners (*anagami*) to the highest, being *arhat*. Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the other hand has full enlightenment (*samyaksambuddha*) as the highest goal of spiritual practice. There are many passages within the Pāli canon which assert that women and men are capable of attaining the four stages of sainthood and there are also many recorded cases in the Therīgatha which highlight the life stories of women who attained *arhathood*. Among these, one story stands out in terms of the Buddha affirming the spiritual capability of women. Once, when the Buddha was asked to comment on the death of 500 wives of King Udena in a fire, the Buddha replied: "Monks, among these [victims], some women disciples are stream-winners, some once-returners and some non-returners. Not fruitless, monks, are all these women disciples who have met their end" (Udāna; VII.). This is a vindicating statement for women which clearly demonstrates that the Buddha acknowledged the high level of spiritual attainment of women in early Buddhism.

Later Mahāyāna sutras based on Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika view of emptiness and other concepts such as *tathāgatagarbha*¹⁶ (Buddha nature), represented in the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*, *Srimaladevi*, and other sutras, declare that a woman can be enlightened just as she is, as woman (Winkelman, 2010). The *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra* is especially interesting as it uses the imagery of a goddess and one of early Buddhism's most important characters, Śāriputra, the foremost disciple of the Buddha. The sutra

¹⁶ *Tathāgatagarbha* is a Sanskrit term which states that all beings without exception, human or otherwise - have the potential to become enlightened, to become a Buddha. It is also referred to as the 'enlightened gene' by some scholars. It is the Buddha seed or nature which is inherently present in all living beings.

mocks Śāriputra in an effort to attack early Buddhist tendencies of maligning women as inferior to men. Śāriputra who is portrayed as spiritually inferior to the goddess propounds the view that women cannot be enlightened and need to be reborn as men to become a Buddha. To prove her point, the goddess transforms Śāriputra to a woman and teaches him that the body is only the form and has nothing to do with becoming enlightened (Winkelman, 2010). This powerful imagery is frequently used by Buddhist feminist writers to point out the irrelevance of gender in attaining enlightenment.

The Buddha expounded the same spiritual path for men and women and that sex and gender are soteriologically insignificant and even an impediment to attaining the goal of liberation. Buddha's radical stand on women's spiritual capability is consistent with his basic teaching of "no-self" (Skt: *anātman*), which essentially means the individual has no fixed nature/existence. Therefore, if one adheres closely to the basic tenets of Buddhism, it is evident that biological differences of sex or even socially conditioned gendered roles are irrelevant to pursuing and completing the spiritual path charted out by the Buddha for the salvation of all living beings. Nonetheless, Sponberg (1992) warns that it is premature to generalise that sexual egalitarianism is the hallmark of Buddhism as a whole. Moreover, it is still historically unverifiable that the Buddha's personal view on this matter was egalitarian even though the doctrines he preached transcended gender, race, caste and class barriers. Sponberg's observation echoes Collett's (2006) critical review of the works of Caroline Rhys Davis, Mabel Bode and I.B. Horner whom she criticised as having the tendency to generalise sexual egalitarianism in Buddhism, placing the Buddha as pro-women in their works.

It is this very ambiguity in soteriological inclusiveness which has been exploited by later Buddhists who propound the idea that the male sex is superior to the female sex. This idea has been used to justify why women cannot become a Buddha. Since the time of the Buddha, Buddhist scholars have contemplated and debated about the possibility of

achieving enlightenment in the female body. Even to this day, there are certain factions within Buddhist practitioners who maintain that women cannot become enlightened. The main argument given by male Buddhists is that women do not possess the physical characteristic (Skt: *mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa*) which bears the mark of a *cakravartin*, "universal monarch," which is associated with the form of a Buddha (Kabilsingh, 1991). Due to a lack of male physical characteristic, Buddhist women have been made to believe that women cannot become a Buddha, in all probability an attempt by Buddhist male clergy/*saṃgha* to deny women's spiritual potential. Women had to first be reborn as male in order to become enlightened. Early Mahāyāna sutras, such as *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Pure Land Sutra*, developed the idea that a woman can be enlightened by transforming herself into a male. It is because of this supposed limitation of the female body and other reasons which will be discussed under ascetic misogyny which has led Buddhist women to believe that the female birth is to be avoided at all costs.

However, contemporary scholars like Kajiyama Yuichi have shown that the recurring statement in the Pāli Buddhist Canon that a woman cannot become a Buddha is a later addition to the Canon (Kabilsingh, 1991; Sponberg, 1992). This is testimony that the Buddhist Canon is not a sacrosanct document which is free from tampering or mistakes. Many such examples occur in the Pāli and Sanskrit Buddhist texts which reflect androcentric tendencies of male scholars, mostly monks aimed at systematically subordinating women. Gross (1996) draws our attention to this tendency across major world religions as well. Even though the Buddha's stance on women was nothing less than revolutionary, society continues to place limitations on women's ability to practice the spiritual path, on the basis of the gaps in Buddhist literature on the Buddha's personal views on women.

2.2.2 Institutional Androcentricism—Is Buddhism Patriarchal?

Even though the doctrines of Buddhism generally espouse soteriological inclusiveness, institutional Buddhism has succumbed to prevailing attitudes about gender roles in most societies which it has been transplanted to. This second attitude towards women which Sponberg (1992) termed as institutional androcentricism, which developed much later in Buddhism, revolves around how women in the monastic institution (Skt: *saṃgha*) were depicted and treated. More specifically, institutional androcentricism refers to the male *saṃgha*'s limitation placed on women renunciates to conform to social norms of gender roles. This mode of analysis is important for contemporary feminist writers to understand why Buddhist women are subordinated in the *saṃgha* in the present day. Sponberg (1992) referred primarily to the monastic code of conduct, i.e. the *Vinaya* in search of androcentric or even misogynistic elements which put women in a subordinate position.

Any attempt to understand contemporary institutional Buddhism will be incomplete without understanding the context in which women were admitted to the *saṃgha* during the time of the Buddha as well as the reaction of monks in early Buddhism towards this revolutionary opportunity which the Buddha accorded to women. The standard storyline in Buddhism is that the Buddha was opposed to allowing women to be ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs*¹⁷ but it was Ananda, a cousin and attendant of the Buddha, who compelled the Buddha to do so. The Buddha relented only when his foster mother agreed on behalf of all future nuns to accept eight special rules (Skt: *gurudharma*) in addition to existing monastic rules. These *gurudharmas* effectively sealed the fate of all Buddhist nuns from that time onwards to subordinate themselves to the monks. Therefore, regardless of seniority or experience, nuns must remain in a subordinate position to monks, if they are to be accepted as legitimate members of the *saṃgha* (Kabilsingh, 1991; Gross, 1996;

¹⁷ Fully ordained nuns

Gutschow, 2004; Winkelmann, 2010). Nuns also face a two-year probationary period to screen for pregnancy (although human gestation only requires nine months) (Gross, 1996). This deliberate discrimination is contradictory to the spirit of equality of gender, race, caste and creed as expounded by the Buddha throughout his 45-year ministry.

According to Kabilsingh (1992), the teachings of the Buddha were first written down about three hundred years after the Buddha passed away. Before that a few councils were organised to streamline and preserve the teachings of the Buddha, known as the *dharma*. Of particular interest to institutional Buddhism is the first Buddhist council, immediately after the passing away of the Buddha; where five hundred fully ordained monks (Skt: *bhikṣus*) took it upon themselves to preside over this council. Nuns were not invited to participate although there were a number of enlightened fully ordained nuns (Skt: *bhikṣuṇī*), highly praised by the Buddha himself for their great knowledge and skill in expounding the *dharma*. The five hundred *bhikṣus*, all of whom were supposedly *arhats* (highest stage of sainthood in Buddhism) accused Ananda, for paving the way for women to enter the *saṃgha* by coercing the Buddha to allow Mahāpajāpati Gotami, the Buddha's maternal aunt and foster mother, to be ordained as a *bhikṣuṇī*. The *bhikṣus* blamed Ananda for being the catalyst in creating the female *saṃgha* and solely responsible for the lifespan of the Buddha *dharma* being reduced from 1000 years to only 500 years (Kabilsingh, 1991). Out of respect or fear of the Buddha, these monks could not voice their resentment when the Buddha was alive so they raised these issues immediately after the Buddha passed away.

However, Sponberg (1992) found that the story of Mahāpajāpati's ordination is depicted in several different versions in Pāli and Sanskrit, which relates the same basic story except for a few significant details, the most developed of which is contained in the *Cullavagga* (Chapter X), second of the two *Khandhakas* of the Theravāda *Vinaya*. The variations in significant details raises doubts as to whether the events surrounding

Mahāpajāpatī's ordination really occurred as the authors claim or were additions by the male clergy with some personal agenda. Many contemporary scholars believe that the eight *gurudharmas* are a later addition (Kabilsingh, 1991; Sponberg, 1992). However, these stories have been used by *bhikṣus* to justify their superior position in the *saṃgha* and perpetuate subordination of the nuns which have affected the latter's spiritual practice, as is evident in many Buddhist countries like Thailand and in the Himalayan region, Bhutan included. It reflects the male *saṃgha*'s opinion that the Buddha did not consider the ascetic life as suitable for women.

Historical accounts in Buddhism tell us that women responded very positively to the opportunity which the historical Buddha accorded to both men and women to be free of household duties to join the monastic order. Sponberg (1992) observed that women joined the *saṃgha* in large numbers that the male *saṃgha* had to manage this new unprecedented interest. According to *Cullavagga* (Chapter X; 263-264) of the *Vinaya*, the lay society taunted the monks and nuns regarding the *Vinaya* rite of exhortation¹⁸ (Pāli: *ovada*) as the former doubted the reasons why a large number of nuns were gathered at the monks' monastery. The text mentions that society associated the nuns as wives and mistresses of the monks whom the former thought were visiting the monks for sexual escapades. Indian society in ancient Buddhist times had a difficult time digesting that women could lead autonomous lives apart from men. Since the *saṃgha* had to rely on Indian society (with all its traditional Brahmanical values) for its sustenance, the male *saṃgha* felt that they needed to do something about the nuns or risk falling out of favour with the lay community. The monks began to regard the order of the nuns as a threat to the former's survival. Hence, the male *saṃgha* saw it fit to regularize the nuns' order at the expense of the nuns (Sponberg, 1992). Even though Buddhist doctrines expound soteriological inclusiveness, but in order to conform to social expectations, the male *saṃgha* chose to

¹⁸ Is a special ceremony whereby a senior monk formally questions the nuns regarding the eight special rules (*gurudharma*)

please the lay community instead of adhering to Buddhist principles of equality and inclusiveness.

Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why contemporary scholars doubt the historical legitimacy of the eight *gurudharmas* as being attributed to the Buddha. Instead, they attribute it to male *saṃgha* who were concerned with preserving financial support. Scholars like Sponberg hypothesise that later monks added the eight *gurudharmas* to demonstrate to Indian society that nuns were under the authority of monks, which made the order of the nuns more acceptable in the eyes of Indian society. It is difficult to determine historically whether Mahāpajāpati assented to the rules or whether the event ever took place at all; but the eight rules, whatever its origin, has had profound effect on Buddhist nuns and women in general. Nuns have been accorded second-class status in an order which the Buddha intended relationships to be like elder brothers and sisters (Kabilsingh, 1991; Sponberg, 1992). Monks effectively compromised Buddhist principles in favour of public opinion, which has caused much hardship to the nuns. It is this subordinate status that has resulted in “diminished prestige, educational opportunity, and financial support” (Sponberg, 1992: 18), which is clearly evident in most Buddhist societies today, including Bhutan.

The original order of the nuns, which enjoyed autonomy, became more marginalized and eventually ceased to be of any significance to Indian Buddhist writers who no longer mentioned them in official Buddhist accounts since the third century C.E. (Falk N., 1980). The *Culavamsa* reports that *bhikṣuṇīs* were only referred to up to the end of the tenth century C.E. Androcentric and misogynist views became increasingly characteristic of the *saṃgha*. Eventually, the order of the nuns died out in India and much of the Theravāda Buddhist world. The Sri Lankan *bhikṣuṇī* lineage has survived in China and spread to Korea and Vietnam.¹⁹ With all its androcentric bias, it is indeed surprising that

¹⁹A group of Sri Lankan nuns were invited to help give ordination to a group of Chinese women in the year 433 C.E.

the order of nuns managed to survive for as long as it did, though marginally (Sponberg, 1992).

We are told, in the *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*, which contains many passages that exalt the merits of women; that Buddhist women, especially Buddhist nuns, excelled in the spiritual path. Contemporary Buddhist society propounds a different view that women need not renounce family life to be spiritual. Indeed, during 11th century C.E. in Sri Lanka, the order of the nuns (the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*) was not restored, even though the king resuscitated the order of the monks because becoming a nun was not viewed as necessary for women (Barthololomeusz, 1992). Thai Buddhism also propounds the view that renunciation is not a necessary religious role for women (Kabilsingh, 1992). The suggestion that women need not lead an ascetic life in order to progress spiritually is puzzling not only in Theravāda Buddhism which has numerous stories of early Buddhist women who became *arhats* after joining the monastic order, but also in later Vajrayāna Buddhism. Female adepts like Gelongma Palmo²⁰, Mandarava, and Laksminkara regarded marriage as a burden that they resorted to disfigure or deface themselves in order to become ascetics. All of them and the Tibetan heroine Nangsa affirmed that enlightenment can only be attained outside of the bondage of marriage which is nothing but servitude and sorrow (Gutschow, 2004; Crins, 2008).

The low interest in restoring novice and full ordination for nuns in the Theravāda tradition in the present day is based on the claim that the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage died out in the 11th century in Sri Lanka, therefore, it is no longer possible for women to become ordained nuns. In the case of nuns in the Vajrayāna tradition (who follow the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*), full ordination is not available to them. At best, they are novice nuns (Skt: *śramaṇerikā*). The male *saṃgha* claim that *bhikṣuṇī* ordination never reached Tibet, hence, the male *saṃgha* are unable to confer full ordination to Vajrayāna

²⁰ Known as Bhikshunī Lakshmi in Sanskrit

Buddhist nuns (Damcho, 2012). Nonetheless, it must be noted that nuns in the Mahāyāna tradition in China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam still enjoy some degree of autonomy and prestige as they can still be ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* in accordance with the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*.

The discussions above provide a lucid historical background as to why many contemporary male Buddhist clergy are not interested in restoring full ordination of nuns in Theravāda or Vajrayāna Buddhism; as public opinion, personal agenda and survival of the *saṃgha* is the cornerstone of Buddhist institutions. Buddhist principles and basic human rights which expound gender equality have little room in the *saṃgha*. Although Buddhism's basic teaching is on impermanence, there is the tendency of contemporary monastic institutions to cling to historical events as permanent truths. Moreover, although the Buddha's teachings and monastic institution have survived for more than 2600 years which renders the predictions²¹ untenable (Gross, 1996), many monks still cling to the notion that women are a threat to the survival of the *saṃgha*. There is little willingness on the part of the male *saṃgha* to change the status-quo which brings them much benefit. Gross aptly surmised that past events surrounding the nuns' order are not normative precedents "but only fluctuations in the endless process of change" and that "nothing on earth lasts, not even patriarchy" (Gross, 1996: 191). Hence, as Gross suggests, Buddhist institutions should view patriarchy as nothing more than incidental events arising out of causes and conditions instead of holding on steadfastly to institutional androcentricism as if it were an eternal truth.

The underachievement of contemporary Buddhist nuns in their spiritual practice and education is directly attributed to inadequate Buddhist institutions, which provide ample opportunities for men to achieve higher spiritual attainments but limit the potential of women (Gross, 1996). Gross summarises the feminist evaluation of Buddhist history as

²¹ That admitting women into the *sangha* will reduce the lifespan of Buddhism from 1000 to 500 years.

“massive and irreconcilable conflict between view and practice, between what is affirmed and how it is put into practice” (Gross, 1996: 140).

2.2.3 Ascetic Misogyny—Divergence between Buddhist Theory and Practice

Buddhism’s basic doctrines hold no room for gender bias, as observed in its principle of soteriological inclusiveness. However, there is divergence between theory and practice in Buddhism. As we have seen in institutional androcentricism, gender bias exists in the monastic institution which is consistently being endorsed by the monastic code of conduct, the *Vinaya*. Here, I attempt to show that negative depictions of women are peppered in many other Buddhist texts as well which are much more virulent in nature. Texts like the Buddha’s past life stories, the *Jatakas*²², commonly believed by scholars to be authored by a fifth century C.E. monk, Buddhaghosa, is viewed as the most blatant misogynist text in Buddhism. Interestingly, most Buddhists till today believe that the *Jatakas* were the Buddha’s own spoken words, which lends more weight to these parables. Sponberg (1992) believes that this third attitude of ascetic misogyny found its firm footing in Buddhism not during the life of the Buddha itself, but much later, as a response to a different set of problems than the one we discussed in institutional androcentricism. It arose as a result of later monks who were influenced by the Brahmanical idea of ascetic purification as a way to spiritual liberation rather than psychological purification as expounded by the Buddha.

Fear of the feminine can be categorised as a form of clinging in Buddhist theory. Mahāyāna Mādhyamaka philosophers like Candrakirti often quoted from the *Drdhadhyasayapariṣṭha Sutra* which uses the image of a magician creating a woman (who is not real) who entices a man to develop feelings of lust. The unwholesome thoughts and subsequent fear of the feminine which arose in the man is shown in this

²² Is a non-canonical Buddhist text which depicts the Buddha’s past lives in parables featuring animals and hero legends

sutra as being without any basis because the magical woman does not truly exist. Using the Mādhyamaka concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness), this sutra demonstrates that in the ultimate sense, women, like men and other phenomena do not possess inherent existence and that it is foolish to blame women for defiling men since neither truly exist independent of causes and conditions.

Examples of misogynistic statements in Buddhist texts include the suggestion that women are incapable of achieving liberation from *samsāra*, are inferior to men—weaker human beings, uncontrolled, envious, greedy, weak in wisdom, innately sinful, fickle-minded, temptresses, incapable of keeping secrets, promiscuous, obstacles to liberation (for men), etc. (Law, 1956-1957; Kabilsingh, 1992; Sponberg, 1992; Gutschow, 2004; Schaeffer, 2004). Even contemporary Buddhist authors such as Law (1956-1957) in seeking to understand the role of lay women in early Buddhism painted a one-sided picture of women as evil and to be avoided by men seeking the spiritual path to liberation. In the most extreme sense, Law mentioned that women are 'torches that light the way to hell.' Law selectively pointed out all disparaging remarks about the defects and vices of women as found in early Buddhist texts which serves to entrench women as objects of impurity. All blame on the inability of a man to progress spiritually is put on the woman as the object of impurity, deviously emancipating the male ascetic from individual responsibility to take care of his own unwholesome thoughts. These insinuations about women being responsible for the sexual behaviour of men reflect poorly on Buddhist men's ability to control their own sensual desires (Gross, 1996). The Buddha, an enlightened being, transcended gender differences and did not see the need to avoid women. Therefore, it is counter-productive for Buddhist texts to disparage women as temptresses since it reflects that monks are not in control of their minds.

Examining the first genre of misogynistic statements, Buddhist texts mention that the Buddha purportedly advised monks that "woman is a stain on celibacy" (Sponberg, 1992).

Such virulent passages are more frequent in Mahāyāna literature than the supposedly²³ earlier Pāli literature. Quoting the Mahāyāna *Saddhamarmasmṛtyupasthana*, "Women are ever the root of ruin, and of loss substance; when men are to be controlled by women how can they gain happiness? A woman is the destruction of destructions in this world and the next; hence one must ever avoid women if he desires happiness for himself". In the *Mahasukhavati Vyuha Sutra* (the Long Sutra of Amitābha Pureland), it is mentioned that one will never be reborn as a woman if one fervently prays to Buddha Amitābha, who is one of the five primordial Buddhas in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Buddha is also purportedly to have said in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN, II. 82-83) of the Pāli Canon that women lack wisdom which is why they are relegated to subordinate positions within society.

What are the consequences of these Buddhist teachings to Buddhist women in the present day? In Bhutanese society, the female body signifies defilement and constraint. Women are regarded as impure due to their reproductive roles, e.g. menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and other sexual characteristics such as vagina and breasts (Gross, 1996; Crins, 2008). Male body in Himalayan cultures is regarded as inherently pure, in terms of morals, thus highly desirable while the female body is to be reviled and rejected (Gutschow, 2004: 17). Labrang men in Bhutan invoke the idiom that the male body is karmically auspicious as opposed to a female body which is morally impure, rendering female birth as inferior (Crins, 2008). These beliefs perpetuate gender discrimination such as access to places of worship and many more. For example, women are not allowed to enter certain portions of temples, especially where the statue of the protector deity is kept (Gutschow, 2004; Crins, 2008). In Thailand, especially the northern provinces, women are not allowed to circumambulate the stupa or enter the main hall (Kabilsingh, 1991). The same is true for women and the low caste in Spiti Valley, in the Indian Himalayas

²³ There is an ongoing scholarly debate as to whether the Mahāyāna Sanskrit texts were later than the Pali or vice-versa.

(Tsomo, 2009). Ritual practices pertaining to childbirth and agriculture perpetuate the idea that the female body is impure, thus, inferior to the male body.

The Bhutanese, much like their other Himalayan counterparts, associate merit and purity with males, especially celibate males (monks) which is why merit-making is showered on monks and ritual practices are the domain of monks with little opportunity for the nuns to transcend these preferences. Many Buddhist practices reproduce an implicit hierarchy between nature and culture, female and male, and profane and sacred (Klein, 1995). While the female body signifies defilement and constraint, the male body suggests purity and potential.

Another vicious belief among Buddhist women, including Bhutanese women is that one's gender is the result of evil deeds (karma) committed in the previous births. Many monks uphold this view as they rely heavily on the support of laywomen and convince women that they must make merit to the monks in order to escape from the tyranny of female rebirth in future lives (Kabilsingh, 1992; Gutschow, 2004). Women are depicted in Tibetan idioms as being seven lifetimes behind men. Therefore, in order to offset their evil karma which resulted in a female body, i.e. to be reborn as a man, women must accumulate merit of seven additional lifetimes (Gutschow, 2004). Bhutanese folktales say that a woman is nine lifetimes behind men (Thinley, 2005 in Crins, 2008) while some contemporary Bhutanese believe that women are 150 times lower than men. As a result of such deeply ingrained beliefs, women in the Himalayas such as Zangskar, Spiti and Bhutan and other Buddhist countries such as Thailand desire to be reborn as male (Kabilsingh, 1992; Gutschow, 2004; Crins, 2008). The female body is not an option in future lives, either for males or females, as revealed in a survey by Crins (2008) on randomly selected Bhutanese men and women. As Gutschow (2004: 17) rightly observed, "No Buddhist in her right mind desires a female body". She brought forth a chilling perspective that women pray to be reborn in the sex of their aggressors. From a feminist

perspective, the problem lies not in a female body, but the “conditions that make life difficult or intolerable for women” (Gross, 1996).

Since Buddhist doctrines propound inclusiveness, how did misogynistic attitudes creep into Buddhism? According to Sponberg (1992), misogynistic elements in Buddhism are from a pre-Buddhist era. Brahmanical traditions in ancient India were highly misogynistic and contain many rites and rituals which involve the concept of impurity. The most misogynist text in Brahmanism is the *Manu Smriti*, the Code of Manu which details gender roles and emphasises man’s control of women from the womb to the tomb, because of women’s inherently impure nature. Moreover, Buddhism spread beyond the Indian sub-continent throughout much of Asia because of its remarkable flexibility and adaptability to cultures. Wherever Buddhism reached, it suffused itself with local cultures, which were primarily animistic. The notion of purity and impurity is a classic feature of animism. In the case of Bhutan, Buddhism only came to Bhutan in the 8th century C.E. The Bhutanese practiced an animistic religion similar to the Tibetan Bon religion, which involves worship of local deities and elements of nature. Buddhism then blended in with the local culture and evolved to the Buddhism we see today in Bhutan, one with misogynistic tendencies.

However, later Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist texts vindicate women with their unique injunction against disparaging women (Gross, 1996). The tantric practice of Vajrayāna Buddhism requires the practitioner (men and women alike) to observe fourteen root tantric vows; the last of which is to refrain from despising women. In addition, a tantric practitioner must also keep the Mother Tantra pledge by constantly praising women in mind. Other forms of tantric practice, such as *Cīnācāra Tantra* (2.23) also affirm the above pledges, and quote, "He should worship women" and "He should not ever criticize women or abuse them" (2.24); "He should not ever lie to women" but should, on the contrary, be consistently honest with them (2.24). Biernacki (2006: 192) explains that

these tantric pledges are not about worshipping supramundane female deities but rather, it is about “venerating ordinary living women”.

Failure to keep the vows (Skt: *samaya*) properly results in a root tantric downfall. The rationale behind this vow is that women symbolise wisdom and emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*) (Simmer-Brown, 2002). As the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa affirmed (as cited in Simmer-Brown, (2002: 182)):

Woman is essentially wisdom,
Source of spontaneous *prajñā* and subtle-body.
Never consider her inferior;
Strive especially to see her as Vajravārāhī.

To achieve enlightenment, tantric practitioners must gain insight into the emptiness of all phenomena and self. Therefore, if enlightenment is desired, one must refrain at all costs from misogynistic attitudes through conduct, speech and thoughts since women are the embodiment of the very wisdom which a tantric practitioner aims to achieve—wisdom realising emptiness.

Apart from the formal injunction against maligning women, Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism also includes a very strong tradition of female sacred beings who are essential to the practice of the religion (Gross, 1996). These female sacred beings or *dākinīs* (Tib: *khandroma*) are not found in earlier forms of Buddhism such as Theravāda Buddhism and even Mahāyāna Buddhism (Gross, 1996). Simmer-Brown (2002: 2) explains the important role of the *dākinī* in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practice:

According to the Tibetan tradition, as a female, she [*dākinī*] has a unique power to transform the practitioner and to confer power. Her power comes from her lineage of realization, representing the enlightened nature of mind of both yogins and *yoginīs*. Her mind is the expression of the essence of pristine wisdom, the fundamental wakefulness inherent but undiscovered in all beings. Her female body is vibrant with vitality, uniquely bearing and birthing that pristine wisdom.

Among the famous *khandros* in the history of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Tibet are Yeshe Tsogyal, Mandarava etc. Vajrayāna Buddhists, especially from the Nyingma School observe the twenty-fifth day of each lunar month in the Tibetan calendar as the *dākinī* day. On this day, practitioners, both men and women perform the *tsog* offering ceremony

to honour the *dākinīs* (Klein, 1995). Other powerful icons of wisdom in Vajrayāna Buddhism include the mother of wisdom, *Prajñāpāramitā*. Vajrayāna Buddhists also revere ‘female’²⁴ enlightened beings such as Tāra²⁵ (Tib: *drolma*), Sitapatra (White Umbrella deity), Lion-Faced Dākinī (Tib: *sengdongma*) as well as dharma protectors like Palden Lhamo and many other figures.

Despite the injunction against disparaging women and the existence of powerful enlightened female deities, women in the Himalayan Buddhist world are still discriminated against and considered inferior to men. As in Theravāda Buddhism, there is a disjuncture between theory and practice in Vajrayāna Buddhism. As is the case with Bhutan, many male practitioners view women as lesser beings than men. Having been nurtured in a culture which views women as several lifetimes behind men, they struggle to reconcile their tantric vows and cultural conditioning. As with others vows, there is always a tendency to break them, either accidentally or purposely. Only practitioners with a high level of realisation can transcend cultural conditioning.

2.2.4 Soteriological Androgyny and the Ultimate Irrelevance of Gender

Buddhist teachings espouse that craving for sensual desires is a severe obstacle to liberation. However, unlike other extreme ascetic traditions during the time of the Buddha which focused on the external object as the cause of desire, Buddha taught that the problem lies within oneself. Misogynists in the Buddhist community somehow missed this vital point.

In response to misogynistic tendencies within Buddhism, the Mahāyāna doctrine of nondualism based on Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamaka view of emptiness which reasons that since nothing exists inherently, then, even femininity, which is the basis of discrimination

²⁴ Personified as female as a skilful means to reach out to ordinary people. Note: enlightened beings transcend gender and all other dualistic notions.

²⁵ Who has twenty-one different manifestations and is considered the patron saint of women in the Vajrayāna Buddhist world

against women, does not exist. Thus, women cannot be disqualified from spiritual practice and attainments simply because emptiness transcends gender (Gross, 1996). Thus, the core of soteriological androgyny is the state of androgynous integration which cancels out the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. A Tibetan proverb clearly illustrates this point: “In the enlightened thought there is no male and female. In the enlightened speech there is no near and far” (Gutschow, 2004: 5). The *sūnyatā* doctrine essentially espouses that “dharma is neither male nor female”, i.e. beyond all dualistic conceptions (Kopperdrayer, 2007: 126).²⁶

This new ideal of gender nondualism is fully expressed in Vajrayāna Buddhism although its origin is from the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā)* literature of the early Mahāyāna period (Sponberg, 1992).²⁷ In the Mahāyāna *Mahasukhavati Vyūha Sutra*, it is mentioned that in the Pureland of Buddha Amitābha, known as Dewachen in Tibetan, there is no man or woman, meaning that beings born in the Pureland are androgynous. Dualistic notions such as man and woman are not present in the Pureland of Buddha Amitābha.

Klein, in her *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen* fully articulated the entire concept of soteriological androgyny by focusing on the tantric ritual of Yeshe Tsogyal, the wisdom consort of the founding father of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Tibet and Bhutan, Guru Padmasambhava²⁸. She described the systematic method in which a practitioner uses the tantric liturgy of the *Great Bliss Queen*²⁹—the enlightened *dākinī* Yeshe Tsogyal herself in order to experience the nature of non-dual great bliss and emptiness, which is the essential nature of Yeshe Tsogyal and all sentient beings. The tantric practitioner uses the *Great Bliss Queen* ritual as a meditative exercise in order to discard the notion of the

²⁶ Kopperdrayer (2007) quoting Gross (1996)

²⁷ Around the first century C.E.

²⁸ More commonly known as Guru Rinpoche

²⁹ A liturgy associated with the Great Completion (Dzogchen) practice of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism.

ordinary dualistic self and experience the vast expanse of the primordial mind³⁰ which is beyond all dualistic notions. One imagines oneself as Yeshe Tsogyal and transcends all ordinary dualistic conceptions, including gender differences. If one practices well, one will experience a state of mind which is similar to that of Yeshe Tsogyal and all enlightened beings, who are characterised as possessing the wisdom realising emptiness and great bliss, which is the state of non-dualism. This ritual is essentially similar to other tantric practices which use different deities to accomplish the same ends. According to Klein (1995), this ritual is especially useful to “Western women and to feminist reflection on identity and subjectivity” (Klein, 1995: 170). Tantric rituals such as the *Great Bliss Queen* are skilful means to mould the mind towards discarding the notions of a concrete existing ‘self’.

The effect of this androgynous ideal on Buddhist women is that “repression of female spiritual practice sanctioned by the androcentricism and misogyny of the monastic establishment” is less prevalent (Sponberg, 1992: 28). One core indicator of this positive effect on Buddhist women is Sponberg’s observation of the increase in highly realised women practitioners and masters, especially in Tibet. Gross (1996), drawing from Miranda Shaw’s study revealed that women played a very important role in the initial development of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Tibet. Famous female adepts, such as *Prajñāpāramitā*, Tāra, and Vajrayoginī, and legends of realized women, such as Gelongma Palmo and Yeshe Tsogyal serve as flesh and blood role models (Gutschow, 2004). Other famous and highly revered female Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners are Machig Drupay Gyalmo who was a female siddha of India who revealed the practice of the Buddha of Long life, Amitayus; Jetsun Niguma, sister of the Mahasiddha Naropa, manifested as a tenth-level *bodhisattva* and directly saw the face of Dorje Chang or Buddha Vajradhara (accomplished all three bodies of the Buddha). Her foremost disciple

³⁰ Also known as Buddha nature (tatagathagarbha) or emptiness (a state of non-dual fusion of great bliss and emptiness) which is the nature of the primordial mind which all sentient beings possess.

was Khyungpo Naljor, who brought Niguma's teachings to Tibet and established the Shangpa Kagyu lineage, one of the eight transmission lineages of Tibet. Khandroma Sukhasiddhi, a laywoman with a husband and six children who accomplished complete enlightenment and had direct vision of the primordial Buddha Dorje Chang (Skt: *vajradhara*); Padarbum, who achieved complete enlightenment in a single lifetime; Rechungma, realised students of the great Tibetan yogi Milarepa; Sahle Aui, student of Milarepa who meditated in solitude for many years, achieving enlightenment; Machig Lhabkyi Dronma (1055-1152) who founded the lineage of Chöd practice in Tibet (one of the eight transmission lineages of Tibet) and mastered the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*; Jomo Menmo (1248-1283) was born as the activity emanation of Yeshe Tsogyal, and also that of Machig Lhabdron; Jetsunma Mingyur Paldron (1699-1769), Jetsunma Shukseb, renown as Ani Lochen, (1865-1951) who was a master of Chöd practice; Jetsunma Thrinley Chödrön (19-20th century); Sera Khandro Deway Dorje (1899-1952), who was a great female Tertön whose treasure texts are revered by many great Nyingma masters; Tseringma, now a tenth-level Bodhisattva, was a female goddess tamed by the Jetsun Milarepa who is now a protector of the dharma; Jetsunma Tsewang Lhamo (passed away in 1995), Khandro Urgyen Tsomo was the consort to the 15th Gyalwa Karmapa and an incarnation of Yeshe Tsogyal; the late Gelongma Khechog Palmo (Mrs. Frieda Bedi) was an English woman who was the first foreign nun of Tibetan Buddhism (1921-1977) and now reincarnated as a female trulku, Jamyang Drolma Lama (Karma Drubgyu Thargay Ling, undated). Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, a living Western Buddhist nun and Buddhist master is especially revered by Western Buddhists. These female masters have continued to inspire generations of Vajrayāna Buddhist women in the Himalayas and have now become the role models for female Western Buddhists and other non-Himalayan Vajrayāna Buddhists who yearn to identify with female Buddhist personalities who can inspire them on the path to enlightenment.

2.3 The History of Feminist Writings on Buddhism

The discussions about the four main attitudes towards women in Buddhism, drawing mainly from Sponberg's analysis provided some insights into the works of early Buddhist authors, who were predominantly male. My aim in this section is to systematically analyse the works of female Buddhist scholars, who set the stage for the debate on gender and Buddhism. The gender debate in Western scholarship of Buddhism began in 1893 with the works of three prominent female writers, namely Caroline Rhys Davis, Mabel Bode and I.B. Horner. Here, I draw on Collett's (2006) analysis of these three female writers, in terms of how their theories and methods have shaped the gender debate in Buddhism. She critically analysed all relevant texts, with particular emphasis on texts which were not included in past literature on ancient Indian Buddhism and the reasons for the misinterpretation of the literature on women. Collett based her work on eleven texts authored by, about, or concerned in some way with women namely the *Vinaya*, *Therīgatha*, *Samyutta Nikāya*, *Apadanas*, *Avadanasataka*, *Divyavadana*, *Dhammapadatthakatha*, *Manimekalai*, *Paramatthadīpanītherīgathatthakatha*, *Āṅuttara Nikāya* and *Manorathapurani*. These texts formed the core of the Buddhism and gender debate within Western scholarship.

Collett's main contention with these early female Buddhist writers is the manner which they generalised Buddhist attitudes towards women. She argues very convincingly, much like Sponberg (1992) that not all texts demerit women and there can be texts which simultaneously ridicule and respect women. Therefore, there is no single Buddhist attitude towards women. Collett also highlights the manner in which important Buddhist textual records on women in Indian Buddhism usually mention women only in passing as part of a larger discussion. In fact, the *Therīgatha*, a collection of poems in verse form, attributed to the elder nuns (Pāli: *therīs*) who lived during the lifetime of the historical

Buddha is sidelined by scholars as it is only a small text in the larger *Vinaya*, the monastic code of conduct. However, according to Collett (2006: 77), “the *Therīgatha* stands as a unique testament to women's position in ancient Buddhist society.” She asserts the fact that the *Therīgatha* existed at all in ancient India is evidence of early Buddhist liberal attitudes towards women and laments that Western scholars never gave the text the position it deserves even though the text places women in such esteemed position.

The Theravāda Pāli texts have been more of an authority in the West, e.g. the Pāli *Vinaya* and the *Therīgatha* which have overshadowed all other textual evidence. Obviously, there is imbalance in the assessment of the textual records in the gender debate in Buddhism, one of the reasons being access to Western scholars in terms of language. Collett asserts that if the texts are translated in English or other European languages, then they gain wider readership. However, access is not the only factor contributing to this imbalance. There are three interrelated factors contributing to the gender imbalance in Western scholarship, i.e. Orientalism, Protestant Buddhism and the Doctrinal Approach. Collett (2006) also observed that the works of these early female writers can be categorised into these three categories.

2.3.1 Orientalism

Orientalism is a Western construct based on the notion of the “the Orient” which desires all cultures to conform to Western ideas of culture and religion. It is a sinister tendency to stereotype cultures to conform to Western stereotypes. Orientalism can manifest in many ways. In the context of religion, it generally refers to the emphasis on purity and perfection, i.e. the fantasy of a perfect faith. According to the Collett (2006), orientalism is a key contributing factor to the imbalances in Buddhist scholarship.

In her discussion on orientalism, Collett observed how Western scholars superimposed the history of Christianity onto the history of ancient India whereby they wrote about

Buddhism with close reference to Christianity, including the usage of Christian terminology in their writings on Buddhism. Another aspect of Orientalist tendencies in early Buddhist scholars is the heavy emphasis on Pāli as the best source of original and pure Buddhism as opposed to Sanskrit, mirroring the Christian (or rather, orientalist) tendency to find true religion based on texts. This is especially so when Thomas Rhys-Davids' established the Pāli Text Society in the late 19th century which created the bias towards Pāli. Collett asserts that the "quest for the "original" or "pure" form of Buddhism is an effect of post-enlightenment thinking on the study of this religion of Asia."

Orientalist literature in the gender debate is very evident from the writings of the first Western scholars to study women in ancient Indian Buddhism—Caroline Rhys Davids, Mabel Bode and Horner. All of these three women scholars focused solely on Pāli as the authentic source of their writings on Buddhism. Collett (2006) aptly summarised that "Bode, Rhys Davids, and Horner all stay true to the developing Orientalist strategy of equating the Pāli record with Buddhism in its entirety."

2.3.2 Protestant Buddhism

Protestant Buddhism refers to Protestant and Enlightenment values which have largely defined scholarly work on Buddhism (Collett, 2006). Collett highlights how Western scholars study Eastern religions through their Christian upbringing by placing heavy emphasis on textual analysis rather than understanding the religions as they are lived by the common people. Drawing from Schopen (1997) and Almond (1988), she argues that Buddhism and other non-Western religions are understood through a narrow, homogenous Western image as it is a postcolonial approach that consists of reactions, analysis and the cultural legacy. Western Buddhist scholars study Buddhism in a similar way they would study Christian theology, i.e. they assert that "real Buddhism is textual

Buddhism”. Schopen compared this type of thinking with early Protestant reformers who tried to establish what they deem as “true religion”.

2.3.3 Doctrinal Buddhism

Buddhist texts which have heavy doctrines are preferred by Western scholars and ranked higher in the hierarchy of Buddhist texts. This type of preference also mirrors the Western idea of what religion should be, textual like the Christian Bible. These scholars assume that doctrines make a religion more authentic and that other practices associated with a religion are deviations of the religion. Therefore, the Pāli Canon is seen as the highest of textual records in the hierarchy of Buddhist texts. Collett (2006) asserts that “Such a Protestant-influenced evaluation of Buddhist texts accounts for some of the misrepresentation of the textual record on women from ancient Indian Buddhism.” For example, the *Therīgatha* is part of the Pāli Canon under the *Vinaya* but is less heavy on doctrine and occupies a peripheral position in the hierarchy of Pāli texts. This is why the voices of the ancient women are not given the attention it should by Western scholars, subsequently relegating the early Buddhist nuns to a low status.

Three Sanskrit texts (the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, *Avadanasataka*, and *Divyavadana*) which contain significant textual records on ancient and medieval Buddhist women are pushed into insignificance by Western scholars under the category of “Buddhist narrative literature” as Pāli takes precedence over any other Buddhist literature. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the *Manimekalai*, a Tamil epic, is of little interest to Western scholars who are obsessed with Pāli and heavy doctrines. As a result, important voices of ancient women are not given significance in modern academic study of Buddhism. Very few papers have been published pertaining to these four texts in the gender debate compared to sources from the Pāli Canon (Collett, 2006).

Collett further argues that it is more possible to learn about actual historical Buddhist women in ancient India from these so-called peripheral texts than the central Pāli texts as the central texts present ideas about women but not by women whereas the less doctrinally significant literature actually give a truer picture of Buddhism as it was lived by Indian women. Feminists are often criticised because of their tendency to pick and choose certain texts which highlight women in greater detail. However, Collett convincingly proves a point that such criticisms are made by those mainstream scholars who also do the same with their androcentric work.

The strengths of these three female scholars is that Horner's book, *Women under Primitive Buddhism*, published in 1930 and her articles on women contributing to Buddhism and gender debate were way ahead of her time. In fact, it was the first time anyone actually wrote about women, highlighting the position of women publicly. Likewise Rhys Davids along with Bode and Horner brought women's position and status in general and Indian nuns in particular to visibility from invisibility through her discussion of *bhikṣuṇī* issues. They did not rely only on the key texts of Pāli but from the study and work of Pāli materials on women both from canonical and commentaries.

The weaknesses of the early Buddhist female scholars as observed by Collett are that even though these women's writings were fresh and original on the study of women at that time, they focused only on Pāli texts and that too Horner provided only partial instead of full survey. Also the assumption that only Pāli sources covered the whole picture of Buddhism was a mistake. Secondly, Rhys Davids repeated her usage of Christian language, theory, imagery and metaphors to an extent that she used her own image to construct these women as rational, intelligent and autonomous. These women authors also positioned Buddha as pro-women to fill the gaps of their findings with the assumptions matching their own image. Another main weakness is their limited focus on Pāli sources

as they did not make an attempt to find any sources outside Pāli, like Sanskrit as a means of comparison, rendering their articles narrow and shallow.

Analysing the works of early female writers is particularly important to find new trends which contrast with the works of early predominantly male Buddhist scholars. Moreover, examining their strengths and weakness is imperative to this thesis as it provides greater insights into the faults of overgeneralisations as well as the reductionist way in which early scholars wrote about women. It serves as a practical guideline for future feminist writers to write about Buddhist women in a more holistic manner. In the context of this study, it would be especially useful in the results and discussions chapters in the final thesis, to avoid treading on the same path which led past feminist writers to overgeneralise Buddhist attitudes towards women and the religious lives of Buddhist women.

2.4 Summary

I have analysed the writings of ancient male Buddhist scholars, early female writers on Buddhism as well as contemporary feminist Buddhist writers to understand the evolution which has taken place in the way women are discussed about in Buddhist writings. From the works of Sponberg (1992), we saw the variety of attitudes towards women in Buddhism and how early scholars interpreted the Buddha's doctrines to maintain institutional Buddhism. Analysing Collett's (2006) review of early western female writers in Buddhism, we understand the three distinct attitudes of orientalism, protestantism and doctrinal approach which influenced the way these early female writers wrote about Buddhism and Buddhist women.

CHAPTER 3: BUDDHISM IN BHUTAN

3.1 Druk Yul—A Religious History of the Land of the Thunder Dragon

Bhutan is a kingdom of the Himalayas and its history is so intertwined with that of its neighbouring countries, especially those with Vajrayāna Buddhist influence that to discuss Bhutanese history in isolation from Tibet and India would render the chapter incomplete, leaving behind a skewed and narrow understanding of Buddhism in Bhutan. The religious history of Bhutan can be traced back to India and then Tibet as these two countries have an overwhelming influence on the Land of the Thunder Dragon. Although geographically India to the south, west and east is far more accessible than Tibet to the North, Buddhism generally did not make a direct connection from India to Bhutan, with the exception of the first visit to Bhutan by Guru Padmasambhava. Instead, Buddhism spread to Tibet first in the seventh century C.E. and then to Bhutan within the same century (Wangchuck, 2006; Namgyel, 2008). It is through Tibet that religious masters of India and Tibet have greatly influenced the religious landscape of Bhutan.

This chapter brings us on a journey from medieval to modern Bhutan to understand how Bhutan was established and developed into the tiny but significant last remaining Himalayan Vajrayāna Buddhist kingdom in the world. The religious history of Bhutan is intertwined with its political history as several of the historical characters who painted the history of Bhutan were both monks as well as secular rulers. In terms of its religious history, the primordial shamanistic religion, i.e. Bon and Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism had shaped the religious realm of Druk Yul to form the blend of Vajrayāna Buddhism that we see in Bhutan today. In order to understand prevailing religio-cultural attitudes towards Bhutanese women, it is imperative to showcase the history of Bhutan as a prelude to any discussion on the status of women in general, and nuns, in particular in the Bhutan we see today.

The religious history of Bhutan largely revolves around two prominent male figures, namely Guru Padmasambhava, who is credited to bringing Buddhism to Bhutan, specifically, the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism in the seventh century C.E. and Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who was instrumental in shaping the religio-political landscape of Bhutan as we know it today. Interestingly, both Guru Padmasambhava³¹ and Shabdrung did not hail from the Land of the Thunder Dragon. Guru Padmasambhava was an Indian prince from the Swat Valley, northwest of India (now Pakistan) while Shabdrung was a Tibetan. Whatever the origins of these historical personalities, the religio-political history of Bhutan was almost entirely shaped by male figures, with the occasional mention of a few queens and wives of famous religious personalities, e.g. Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo. Even so, these women are merely mentioned in passing. Women, in the few instances portrayed in the religious and political history of Tibet and Bhutan are described as consorts either for the purposes of tantric practice to elevate a male's spiritual status or to produce male heirs to either secular or even religious dynasties. Male religious personalities who helped spread religion in Tibet and Bhutan were mostly monks and due to some prophecy or vested interests, took consorts and produced heirs to maintain their lineage and advance their religio-political dynasties. When all these illustrious conquering and spreading of their lineages were going on, women, due to androcentric historical reporting, remained invisible, insignificant and utilised only for their reproductive nature and female physiology. Little credit is given to women for their religious practice, spiritual realisations or other contributions. This chapter will unfold the deeply entrenched androcentric tendencies which have created a distorted perception of Bhutanese women, creating far-reaching consequences for generations of Bhutanese women who have been side-lined and reminded of their insignificance due to their absence in the religio-political history of the region.

³¹ Also known as Guru Rinpoche (Precious Master) or Lopen Pemajungney (Lotus Born Master)

3.1.1. Overview of Bhutanese Religio-Political History

One of the earliest recorded periods of the country is the arrival of Guru Padmasambhava, who commissioned the building of temples in the seventh century, including the famed Taktsang (Tiger's Nest Monastery) in Paro, Western Bhutan, the site of Guru Rinpoche's first arrival in Bhutan, riding on the back of a tiger from Tibet. Guru Padmasambhava, greatly revered as the second Buddha in Bhutan and his consorts, Mandharava and Yeshe Tsogyal are highly revered by the Bhutanese, more than any other religious figure. Guru Padmasambhava subdued demons and spirits which were frequently tormenting the people, thereby winning the hearts and minds of the people.

In the beginning, Bhutan was not a unified country as it was ruled by secular chieftains. However, power subsequently fell to the hands of religious families between 1000 to 1600 C.E. Since then, the country has been administered, either directly or indirectly under religious leaders, i.e. Vajrayāna Buddhist monks, either through the office of the Dharmaraja, Desi or the Je Khenpo. The monks were considered very learned as education from the onset of organised Buddhism in Bhutan was fully provided by monasteries whose doors were open exclusively to boys and privileged families (Phuntsho, 2013). Monks had ample opportunities for further studies to Tibet and even India. During medieval times, the only form of education in the country was monastic education. Hence, candidates who excelled in monastic education were naturally selected to hold important positions in the monastic hierarchy and subsequently, the government. Since women were denied monastic education and to a large extent, still are till today, they were left as invisible 'spectators' in the illustrious history of Bhutan, as seen from almost every book on the history of Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2013).

The first rulers of Bhutan were known as the Dharmaraja (Dharma King). The beginning of the first Dharmaraja, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, marked the unification

of the nation in the seventeenth century. It was during the introduction of the first Dharmaraja that the dual system³² of ruling the kingdom under the religion and the secular was introduced, brought from Tibet (Namgyel, 2008; Norman, 1981). This title or rather, system was replaced by Desi or the Regents with the Ponlops to help in each districts and the Golden throne holder³³. The Golden Throne holder was always a religious figure as it started with Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the unifier of the country. Traditionally, the Shabdrung's reincarnation ascends the throne upon the demise of the previous Shabdrung but by 1759 with the two 6th Golden Throne holders, the reincarnation of Shabdrung died off as the power-crazy laity did not continue to search for the reincarnation of Shabdrung (Phuntsho, 2013). Yet, an admirable and surprisingly stable institution in the middle of such chaotic changes and political conflict was and still is the office of the Je Khenpo³⁴, which was always occupied by a highly educated and enlightened personage, which still exists today. The Je Khenpos normally began their spiritual career as ordinary novice monks and gradually rose through the monastic ranks with great diligence and religious commitment. Thus, the Je Khenpo is not only very well trained in monastic education but also deeply well-versed in rituals, doctrines and meditation practices of the Drukpa Kagyu School, which is the official religion of Bhutan.

After the death of the first Dharmaraja, the country was ruled by the Desi or the regent which started in the year 1591 with the help of the three *dzongpons* or *dzong* rulers of the central seats of Punakha, Wangdiphodrang and Thimphu. The Desi position was almost always occupied by Vajrayāna Buddhist monks or other religious figures until the 47th Desi, when the laities³⁵ took over. Altogether, there were 57 Desis and among these, most of them were monks. The seat or the throne of the leaders used to be passed from uncle

³² The *Tsa Yig* system of Bhutan is based on the Fifth Dalai Lama's *Cho-sid-nyi* (literally means both Dharma and secular) or the Dual System of Government, whereby the secular ruler (Druk Desi) coexists with the spiritual authority (Je Khenpo), unified under a third single ruler (the Shabdrung) (Phuntsho, 2013)

³³ Supreme head of the state, started from Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Later after Shabdrung's demise and before his reincarnations came, it was replaced temporarily by Gyaltshab, literally, a substitute for the king. Now the golden throne holder is the King of Bhutan since king is the head of the State.

³⁴ Spiritual head of Bhutan, with equal status as the king of Bhutan

³⁵ Ordinary people, not celibate monks

to nephew as the chief hierarchs were celibate but after a few generations, the line switched to being passed from father to son with intervention of incarnate figures who were sometimes born within the family (Phuntsho, 2013). By the end of the eighteenth century, power fell back into the hands of the laities as they used brutal means to control the monk bodies, rendering important monk figures as puppets, dancing to the tune of the lay rulers. The Desi system was replaced by the absolute monarchy system at the turn of the 20th century, i.e. in 1907 and ran until 2008 after which the country became a constitutional monarchy (Phuntsho, 2013).

Bhutan had many wars with Tibet and several with Nepal, Sikkim and India in which Bhutan always triumphed. Yet, the lay Bhutanese rulers were often engrossed in internal power struggles which resulted in foreign powers axing Bhutanese territory, which is how Bhutan lost the southern border areas known as '*doars*' to British India and some portions to China in the north. Petty conflicts and power struggles within the Bhutanese administration also compromised unity among the ruling elite. One such incident, the feud among leading figures was over a woman, so we are told by androcentric reporting on the history of Bhutan. Such kind of internal war never happened or was never heard of in the past when the public offices were ruled by celibate monastics (Phuntsho, 2013).

Interestingly, the laities could not fully do away with the monks as they had to depend on monks for many religious decisions, e.g. seeking divinations on important political decisions, such as waging war on enemies. Monks were knowledgeable in the art of divination and could forecast the outcome of wars and battles and advise the lay rulers accordingly. The religious leaders also employed numerous rituals for exorcism and repulsion to safeguard themselves as well as the country. Indirectly even now the country is still in the hands of religious figures as the King and the Prime Minister have to consult the Je Khenpo on important decisions. Hence, the institution of the Je Khenpo is still involved in the administration of the country, albeit indirectly.

At the dawn of the twentieth century after over two centuries of tumultuous theocratic republican rule had worn out the Bhutanese, Sir Ugyen Wangchuk rose as an eminent stature. Bhutan, seeing the significant changes in the power structure as well as relations within the country and the neighbouring countries, due to Jigme Namgyal and Ugyen Wangchuk, father and son, accepted the latter's ascension to the throne as the King and thus the introduction of the hereditary monarchy Bhutan on 17th December 1907, effectively killing off the Desi system of ruling the country. Since then the absolute monarchy has been passed on through a patrilineal system spanning the reign of four kings. Absolute monarchy was abolished at the inception of the fifth king's rule in 2008, when Bhutan for the first time, became a constitutional monarchy (Mathou, 2008; Sinpeng, 2007; Foundation B. , 2008; Phuntsho, 2013). Although Bhutanese monarchs are male, relative importance is given by the Bhutanese to the Queens, Queen Mothers and princesses who are now beginning to emerge as patrons of foundations, writers and social advocates, much like the royal family of Britain. It is through the limelight which these royal women, e.g. Ashi Tsering Yangdon bring that organisations related to women in Bhutan, including the Bhutan Nuns Foundation are starting to gain the much needed support to elevate the status of women in Bhutan (Bhutan Nuns Foundation, 2011).

3.2 The Spread of Vajrayāna Buddhism to Bhutan

The earliest and most well-known links of Vajrayāna Buddhism to Bhutan dates back to Tibet when King Songtsen Gampo, the 32nd King of the Yarlung dynasty built two temples of Bumthang Jampa Lhakhang and Paro Kyerchu Lhakhang (Dorji, 2008; Phuntsho, 2013). Thereafter, Guru Padmasambhava visited Bhutan in 747 C.E., roughly a hundred years after the foundation of the temples. Padmasambhava is no doubt the most important and prominent figure in both history and religion. The Bhutanese world revolves around him and he can be considered the patron saint of Bhutan. His statues are

the central figure in temples and monasteries, even in home shrine rooms. He is taken as the second Buddha but is worshipped as greater than Buddha. Just as Tibet is the destined field of activity for Avalokiteśvara, traditional Bhutanese historians claim that Bhutan is the field of activity for Padmasambhava (Phuntsho, 2013).

The revival of Buddhism in Tibet after King Lang Darma eliminated Buddhism in Tibet and effectively ended the Tibetan dynastic era of the first millennium took place in the beginning of the second millennium. The Buddhism practiced in Tibet was then divided into two principal forms: Nyingma or old school of those who were primarily occupied with the revival of the teachings transmitted during the Tibetan dynastic period and Sarma or new school, which engaged in the new introduction of Buddhism from India and Nepal. The new schools were Kagyu, Sakya and Kadampa or Gelug. These schools further divided into many subdivisions, producing sectarianism in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. The divisions of schools were primarily distinguished on the basis of their lines of transmission, core texts and essential practices of the tantric element of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. The Nyingma school, for example, focuses on the *Dzogpachenpo* or *Dzogchen* (Great Perfection³⁶), the Sakya school on the *Lamdre* (Fruition of Path), Kagyu on *Mahāmudrā* (Tib: *Chagjachenpo* or Great Seal), Six Yogas of Naropa (*Naro Choe Drug*) and tantras such as *Hevajra* and *Cakrasaṃvara*, which were newly transmitted to Tibet during later diffusion (Hopkins, 1985; Powers, 2007; Phuntsho, 2013). The Kadampa or Gelug School specialized in *Lamrim* (*The Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*) and tantras such as *Guhyasamaja* and *Yamantaka*. Philosophically, there is little difference between these schools as they are all adherents of the Prasāngika Mādhyamaka of Ārya Nāgārjuna³⁷, the foremost Indian Buddhist philosopher whose

³⁶ Also known as 'Great Completion'

³⁷ Ārya Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250 CE), was an Indian monk and philosopher who founded of the Madhyamika (Middle Path) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Nāgārjuna (Tib. Klu-grub), considered as the Second Buddha in Tibetan Buddhism, established the concept of *śūnyata* — emptiness or the lack of an absolute reality behind the changing forms of existence — as a fundamental tenet of the Madhyamika school.

works on “emptiness” revolutionised Mahāyāna Buddhism (Kalupahana, 1986; Santina, 1997; Williams, 2009).

Vajrayāna Buddhism of today has four main schools of which Nyingma School is the old school and later three as the new schools, i.e. Sakya, Kadam or Gelug and Kagyu (Phuntsho, 2013). As mentioned earlier, the Nyingma school was introduced by Guru Padmasambhava while the Kagyu lineage was transmitted from Dorje Chang (Buddha Vajradhara) to the Indian masters Tilopa and subsequently Naropa and then to Tibetan master, Marpa Chokyi Lodoe (1012-1097). Marpa, also known as Marpa Lotsawa³⁸ transmitted the Kagyu lineage to two students, Milarepa (1052-1135) and Ngog Choku Dorji (1036-1102). From the lineage of Milarepa which was passed down to Gampopa Sonam Rinchen (1079-1153) came about the four major schools of Kagyu as Gampopa had four main heart disciples. There are eight minor schools, established by the main disciples of Phagdru Dorji Gyalpo, one of the four heart disciples of Gampopa. Thus, the Kagyu school of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism of today consists of four major schools and eight minor schools (see Appendix C). The Drukpa Kagyu School is the state religion of Bhutan and is one of the eight minor schools of the Kagyu tradition. However, the Nyingma School is also practiced in Bhutan, including the royal family. The Sakya and Gelug Schools are not permitted to be practiced in Bhutan, although there are some who do practice it secretly on their own (Pommaret, 2000; Wangchuck, 2006; Namgyel, 2008; Phuntsho, 2013).

The Drukpa Kagyu School began as a successor to Lingrey Kagyu, started by Lingrey Pema Dorji, a great learned yogi. The name Drukpa Kagyu was coined by his disciple, Tsangpa Gyarey. Its main centre was in Ralung, Tibet. The name Druk for the country as well as the state religion of Bhutan is in fact from the Tibetan Drukpa Kagyu lineage.

³⁸ Lotsawa means translator

In the generation after its founder, the Drukpa School spread southward into the western valleys of Bhutan. This took place under the stewardship of a Khampa³⁹ man named Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo, who arrived in Bhutan in 1222. He started his mission by staying in retreat in many places including Paro Taktshang. During his retreat at Taktshang, he had a vision of Guru Padmasambhava that he will be able to establish many centres and benefit many beings. In the process he will also meet his consort. As prophesized he met Sonam Peldren and settled in Dodena and had five sons namely Dampa, Garton, Nyima, Wangchuk and Lama and one daughter whose name is unknown (Rinzin, 1993; Phuntsho, 2013). At this juncture, I wish to highlight the manner in which the history of Bhutan is written which emphasise the achievements of male figures but thrusts women into invisibility. Nowhere in the history of Bhutan is mentioned about famous women adepts. In fact, Khandro Sonam Peldren was a highly accomplished female master who has contributed much to the religious history of Bhutan, but historians, through their androcentric lens have chosen only to portray the history of Bhutan by focusing on male members of her family. Even the name of her daughter is unknown whereas so much detail has been added to the lives of the five sons. This and many other instances of androcentric scholarship discussed in this thesis have contributed to the lost female voices in Bhutan, painting a skewed picture of Bhutanese women as if these women were not important, ordinary and confined to the household with little or no contribution to the illustrious religious and political history of Bhutan. Also, the strong emphasis on male lineage, whether in secular or religious dynasties, including the present-day monarchy, speaks volumes about the Bhutanese attitude towards women in politics and religion.

Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo passed away at the age of sixty-eight as he was poisoned by Lhapa Lama who was jealous of the former's power and great success in spreading his

³⁹ Term for a person who hails from the region of Kham, Eastern Tibet

teachings. Before his death, all his sons were given a seat to oversee. His first son Dampa was appointed to the seat of Tango and to oversee Paro; Garton became the chieftain of the Dung, Hed and Dong group in the east trade route; Nyima was given the Chang and Gung area around Thimphu and later his family provided a bride for Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal in the seventeenth century. Wangchuk went to rule over the areas of Punakha and Gon and the youngest son Lama had no particular interest to rule but he was said to have inherited his father's seat in Dodena. Overall, Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo's sons had entire control over the areas of western Bhutan including its trade routes and his descendants ruled the Drukpa Kagyu throughout the thirteenth to seventeenth century (Phuntsho, 2013).

There is no mention in history about what happened to his daughter and wife and why the female members of his family simply disappeared into oblivion. Also, one could be forgiven for interpreting the early history of the introduction of the Drukpa Kagyu School in Bhutan or at least how it is recorded as a narrative of conquest for territories, including contest for resources rather than an altruistic motivation to elevate the spiritual well-being of the people of Bhutan.

Actually, the Drukpa Kagyu School had already come to Bhutan before Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo through Rinchen Drakpa Paldan, also known as Drupthob Terkhungpa in 1212 and Lorepa (1187-1250), a student of Tsangpa Gyarey, but its spread was not as rapid and successful, compared to Phajo Drukgom's efforts. Since the beginning of Drukgom Zhigpo's mission, the Drukpa lamas succeeded in establishing their traditions that a large number of western Bhutanese people became the patrons of Drukpa Ralung. Thus, the close priest-patron relationship was firmly built between the people of Bhutan and the Drukpa hierarchs of Ralung (Dowman, 2000).

Then came Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal or Shabdrung Rinpoche⁴⁰ in 1616 at the age of twenty-two. Shabdrung propagated the dharma and preserved the Buddhist order. For that he laid the first seat in Cheri, Bhutan in 1620 and that was a new beginning in the history of the Drukpa School because immediately after the temple was completed and consecrated, Shabdrung instituted a monastic community of about thirty monks. Lhawang Lodoe imparted religious instructions to these monks and lay practitioners. Upon Shabdrung's request, Lhawang Lodoe also composed astrological commentaries based on the interpretation of his famous teacher Pema Karpo, that even to date it remains the main source for the unique Bhutanese calendar, of which one distinct feature is the calculation of a day twenty-four hours earlier than in other systems (Phuntsho, 2013). For example, the day associated with the moon, Monday in the rest of the world is Sunday in Bhutan.

During Shabdrung's reign, he was seen as the overall spiritual leader and under him he appointed Je Khenpo, the head of the State Monk Body or *Samgharaja* (Dharma King) and continues to be even today. He also appointed the chief civil administrator, who after Shabdrung's demise became the first Desi or regent, whom the British later called Deb Raja. In 1637, on the completion of the Punakha Dzong, the samgha community that started in Cheri monastery with six hundred monks was shifted to Punakha and till now this shifting to the winter residence of the Central Monastic Body from their summer residence in Thimphu is followed (Rinzin, 1993).

Bhutanese history reveres Shabdrung as not only a great spiritual figure but also a statesman and able leader. During his time, he successfully crushed several foreign invasions and being a great architect and builder, he built a chain of *dzongs* (fortresses) which were and are still used as religious and secular administrative centres. He brought peace, security and stability to the country by establishing a strong and dynamic

⁴⁰ 'the precious jewel at whose feet one submits'

administrative system, codifying a set of strict but just laws based on Buddhist framework which has been incorporated into the present judicial system of Bhutan. The traditions, customs and culture of present day Bhutan carry the mark and influence of Shabdrung who is truly known by all the people of Bhutan as the founding father of the Bhutanese nation (Phuntsho, 2013).

3.3 Vajrayāna Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan

I have explained in the preceding section how Vajrayāna Buddhism was brought from Tibet by Indian and Tibetan masters to Bhutan with the exception of the tradition of Pema Lingpa, which was founded in Bhutan. The Vajrayāna Buddhist practice in Bhutan differs from that in Tibet and other Vajrayāna Buddhist regions in the Himalayas, especially the rites and rituals (the tantric element) though textually (philosophically), there is no difference. Some of the significant practices in Bhutan is the deep devotion to Guru Padmasambhava. He is revered as a second Buddha but he is respected and worshipped more than Buddha unlike in other Vajrayāna Buddhist regions. A prominent position in temples and monasteries is reserved for Guru Padmasambhava, i.e. his statue stands as the centre figure. The focal point of worship and meditation is on Guru Padmasambhava from a great number of Bhutanese religious festivals, ceremonies and prayers; including grand state festivals to the first prayers that toddlers mumble. He is seen not merely as a historical person but as an enlightened energy and power or the state of supreme beings. Based on this theory, people chant his mantra: *Om Ah Hung Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hung*⁴¹ to lead one on the noble path of enlightenment, this being the supreme purpose of life from a traditional Bhutanese perspective. At the same time his role is not limited because like most other Vajrayāna Buddhists of the Himalayan regions, the Bhutanese pray to him for health, wealth, long life, safety, happy rebirth, success in wars, business,

⁴¹ 'May I attain the state of the adamantite Guru Padma'

studies, exams and eventually in spheres of life (Aris, 1986; Tashi, 1999; Phuntsho, 2013).

The most loved and remembered religious personality of Bhutan is Drukpa Kunley (1455-1529), who is known as the 'Divine Madman'. He was from the main seat of the Drukpa Kagyu School in Ralung, Tibet, the monastery where he pursued a religious life in his late teens when his father passed away. Not long after, he lost interest in institutionalised religion and a monastic career and began to roam free as a mendicant. He was a very learned scholar who saw through the ritualistic and materialistic trappings but due to his humorous, ironic songs and behaviours, he soon gained a reputation as 'Madman of Druk' but he was not mad as the people thought him to be. From Drukpa Kunley's perspective, the rest of the world was mad and intoxicated by emotions and negative thoughts (afflictive emotions). Drukpa Kunley was believed to be a highly realized master who gained great heights in spiritual realization and thus viewed worldly pursuits of happiness as meaningless (Dowman, 2000; Penjor, 2005; Evans, 2006).

Drukpa Kunley gained great fame in western and central Bhutan that almost all Bhutanese thought he was a native Bhutanese. He was a crazy-wisdom master to the Bhutanese that many people in Bhutan know his legends of roaming in the country carrying a bow and arrows and wielding a phallus, known as the 'flaming thunderbolt' with which he is believed to have subjugated many demons like the legends of Padmasambhava's taming the malevolent spirits with his spiritual powers. Padmasambhava and Drukpa Kunley were both tantric masters and they have a common relation with women. Padmasambhava's engagement with his consorts were for the spiritual practices and gain and in contrast, the latter is known for his jovial and lustful lifestyle, and for travelling from one place to another enjoying liquor, singing shameless songs and seducing women of all age groups. In reality, he was using sex and alcohol as the means for building spiritual connections for the speedy process to enlightenment and

vulgar songs and dirty adultery jokes to free the chains of social conscious and cultural taboos (Dowman, 2000; Phuntsho, 2013).

Drukpa Kunley did not leave any inheritance in terms of institutional establishments or religious doctrine or practice. Yet, his influence on the Bhutanese religious and cultural tradition is immense. Above all, the impact of Drukpa Kunley is seen in the Bhutanese love of alcohol, the libertine sexual character of both men and women, including the hangings on the four corners of the roof of the house and the main front door of the house, bright paintings on the front wall of the house, with the phallus. There is a temple in the name of Drukpa Kunley, where the stone phallus was used to bless the people who visit the place and is known for the fertility (Dorji, 2008; Dorji, 2009; Phuntsho, 2013). Indeed, Drukpa Kunley stands out as a very unique case among all the religious masters from Tibet. Though Drukpa Kunley may have had the best of intentions in liberating beings from *samsāra* through radical and outrageous means, the Bhutanese culture, has relaxed its taboos on sex and alcohol to an extent that it has become a social ill of the country. Moreover, devious monks and *gomchen* misuse sex as a weapon and excuse for free sex in the name of ‘liberating women’ from *samsāra* via tantric practice. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

The people of Bhutan on a collective basis can be credited for their significant contribution to the growth of Vajrayāna Buddhism in the country as well since they are a very faithful and devoted people who spend much of their time and resources in pursuit of religious instructions and activities. Even though there were no major centres of higher learning in Bhutan compared to Tibet, yet, religious study and practice was and still is to a great extent, widespread. Unlike the Sherpas of Nepal, Bhutanese considered themselves to be distinct from Tibetans though they look up to Tibet as the hub of Buddhist civilization which had produced most of the Vajrayāna Buddhist masters and nobilities.

The Bhutanese are culturally different from Tibetans in language, dress code, architecture and even geographically. Bhutan has an abundance of forests steeped in tranquillity and greenery, as opposed to a largely barren landscape in Tibet. Longchen Rabjampa alias Drime Ozer (1308-64), a Tibetan treasure revealer noted that the architecture in Bhutan was distinct. The houses were built of woods with slanting roofs, still seen across the country. There were also houses built from bamboo (Phuntsho, 2013). Indeed, Bhutanese *dzongs*, monasteries, temples, bridges and houses have a distinct character from those of other Himalayan countries. Traditional Bhutanese houses are built to take advantage of natural light and because of the steep terrain, are usually scattered houses or clustered, instead of built in rows and are relatively spacious. Older Bhutanese houses were made of timber, stone, clay and adobe bricks; family residences typically three-storeyed, the ground floor for livestock, second floor for storage and third floor for living quarters and a shrine. Shrines are sometimes built as an additional floor, isolated from other utility. Between the third floor and the roof an open space is usually kept for open-air storage.⁴²

Bhutanese buildings have very distinct roofs, balconies, windows, window panes, doors, columns, cornices and motives. Bhutan, even in the present day, has very strict architectural requirements which are an attempt to preserve the traditional Bhutanese way of life. Bhutanese Dzongs, Royal Buildings and Monasteries have several unique architectural features distinct from Tibetan royal or religious architecture such as *sertog*, *jabzhi* (roof), *gomang rabsel*, *mago* (entrance door), *norbu bagam* (carving or carved built-in blocks of timber) and *kemar*. The *sertog*, like a protruding *ushnisha* of a Buddha is the highest architectural element placed on *dzongs*, monasteries and royal Buildings and also seen on the *jabzhi* of a *lhakhang* (monastery) that houses very sacred relics.

⁴² Traditional Architectural Guidelines and Bhutan Building Rules- 2002—Department of Urban Development and Housing, Ministry of Communications, downloaded on 18 March 2013 from internet: www.dudh.gov.bt

The language spoken by the Bhutanese is different from Tibetan during teachings, the masters had to make his introduction twice, first in the local language for the people assembled for the reception and then in Tibetan for the higher Lama and his entourage. The Bhutanese have four major languages which are very different from one another. The national language, Dzongkha (language of the *dzong*), developed since the seventeenth century is a refined version of a Tibetan dialect spoken by Ngalop villagers in western Bhutan, based primarily on the vernacular speech of the Punakha Valley. The written script of Dzongkha language is based on *chhokey*, the classical Tibetan script. Traditionally, public and private communications, religious materials, and official documents were written in *chhokey*. *Chhokey*, which exists only in written form, was and still is, understood only by the well-educated (Namgyel, 2008).

In terms of religious events, the festival of *Tsechu* (Tenth day) on every tenth day of the month is celebrated with full devotion to Guru Rinpoche. In a similar way, in different states or districts in Bhutan, the Tsechu festival is celebrated for three to five days with colourful mask dances (Dzongkha/Tib: *cham*) by both monks and laymen practitioners. The mask dances in Bhutan are different from Tibet in terms of the strict emphasis on the invocation of deities by the mask dancers in the wee hours of the morning, just before the performance and then, at the end of the day. Other differences include dance steps, costumes and style of presentation. Through these religious mask dances, the people are given an education on *samsāra* and samsaric life, death and after death as well as karma and rebirth. From these highly popular mask dance events, the Bhutanese people learn to live according to religious principles. Another type of masked dance performance is the *domchoe*, an annual festival performed in the *dzongs* to teach the people about the trappings of *samsāra* through creative visual aids. Besides being an interesting and effective educational tool, the *domchoe* doubles as a dance of the protecting deities of the temple and monasteries and is generally performed indoors.

Apart from massive public events, on a smaller scale; the Bhutanese people have their annual functions such as *choku*, *domchoe*, *kangsha*, *lhabsang*, etc. to clear away the obstacles, and of course, to bring families together. *Choku* (religious ceremony or annual prayer) is usually a two-day annual religious ceremony but some families do extend it to three days. It is held to offer prayers of thanksgiving for the past years' prosperity, good health and bountiful harvest given and to pray for the same in the future for family members as well as all sentient beings. *Choku*, which is influenced by the pre-Buddhist harvest traditions starts by the month of November and goes on until January as it is done after the year's harvest and before the new field work begins. The *choku* preparations start two days before the actual prayer by two to three monks with the preparation of ritual cakes known as *tormas*, an offering made from wheat dough mixed with butter, coloured and sculpted into intricate and beautiful forms. These offerings are offered to the family's protecting deities, mostly to Mahakala and to other buddhas and bodhisattvas. On the actual days the abbot with eight to nine monks or lay practitioners known as *gomchen* will start the prayer ceremony at 3 a.m. with the burning of juniper branches as a practice of smoke offering to purify the air for all beings. The prayers are accompanied by musical instruments and beautiful chanting with lots of food and butter lamp offerings. The sound and rhythm of the bell and *damaru* with the beating of the drums, cymbals and blow of conch shell, trumpet, and horn would help to punctuate the prayer chanting creating an almost hypnotic atmosphere for all present there. All kind of foods and drinks are free-flowing for all the villagers and guests from faraway places. On the last day, people perform dances and finally the fire ceremony and a wrathful mask dance is performed to chase away evil spirits who create obstacles. The dances are performed with lots of prayers and food as well as offering in the form of smell. Then the monks and abbots are offered their share of offerings in the form of cash and foods, after which, they return to their respective houses or temples (Wangchuck, 2006).

Aside from thanksgiving prayers, the Bhutanese, presumably from their pre-Buddhist or Bon⁴³ tradition, emphasise heavily on purification rituals. The *lhabsang* is a kind of purification or ablution prayer for purifying the house, surroundings, air, mind and almost everything. It is also done to bless the house, to protect the occupants from spirit harm and to supplicate the guardian deities for the household to be free from all kinds of diseases. Of course, the Bhutanese also seek happiness and good health by pleasing the local deities and spirits with their sense of smell and the grains added to the fumigation to quell the hunger of the spirits (Wangchuck, 2006; Rigzin, 2011). The local deities and the buddhas, bodhisattvas and gurus are all objects of offering, a classic example of integration of pre-Buddhist practice and the Buddhist pantheon of deities.

Rites of passage, especially birth and death are an integral part of any cultural group, the Bhutanese included. More so than birth, which has a host of purification rituals, the Bhutanese place great importance on death prayers for a period of forty-nine days after death. Although in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, prayers for the deceased are highly emphasised, the terminology may differ from their Bhutanese counterparts. For example, the *jangchok* or prayer for the deceased in Tibetan is known as *kangsha* in Bhutan which are prayers and rituals done for the deceased to show the departed consciousness to a better future rebirth.

Besides masked dances, thanksgiving, purification and death prayers, there are unique Bhutanese Vajrayāna Buddhist prayers which are based on supplication to its historical religious figures, e.g. *Jaju Bumdei Monlam* or supplication prayer and recitation of the mantras of *vajra vidarana*. This prayer is conducted once a year in memory of Shabdrug Ngawang Namgyal in the monasteries and nunneries, especially in government-sponsored monasteries of Bhutan. It is performed for different numbers of days depending

⁴³ Bonchhoe or Bon religion is an animist and shamanistic practice before Buddhism made inroads into the Himalayan region. The term Bon, in Tibetan, means invocation or recitation and has Bon priests called Bonpos like the monks in Buddhism, who perform exorcisms, burial rites and divinations to tame threatening demons and to understand the wishes of the gods. The Bon religion that is practiced in Tibet has little to do with the Bon practice of Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2013), perhaps the basic elements of nature worship, the use of ritual implements and musical instruments are but some of the minor similarities between the two Bon systems.

on the individual monasteries and nunneries. Another type of prayer for Shabdrung Rinpoche is the *kuchoe*—prayers and rituals done to commemorate Shabdrung’s birth and death anniversaries. On this day, the monasteries and nunneries perform prayers and with the lay people thronging to the temples to light butter lamps and offer food and drinks and other requisites to the *samgha*. The *kuchoe* is also conducted on a much lesser scale by individuals at their homes.

The core of the tantric element in Vajrayāna Buddhism in general is the Guru Yoga practice. In Bhutan, the *ladrup* is a practice that is done in relation to one’s Guru. This practice is usually done in retreats but in certain cases, also practiced in the monasteries as a community practice for the long life of gurus. It is a very strict practice when done in the three-year retreats where one is not allowed to touch water for certain months. Another form of Vajrayāna Buddhist practice in Bhutan is the *drupchen*, which literally means “vast accomplishment”. *Drupchen* is a form of intensive group practice that draws together all range of its skilful methods through sand *maṇḍala*, *tsok* (feast) offerings, sacred dance of *cham*, *sādhana* (Tib: *drup thab*)⁴⁴ practice with visualization, *mudrā* (hand gestures), chanting, music, *mantra* and offering of *tormas*. *Drupchens* are mostly held in temples and monasteries as it is a public practice with many people participating in it (Kuenleg, 2000; Anonymous).

Another important and increasingly popular practice, especially among serious Bhutanese women practitioners is the offering practice of *Chöd*. *Chöd* is practiced primarily in Tibetan Buddhism with a lineage stemming from Machig Labdrön who is revered by the Bhutanese and known to have meditated at the Tiger’s Nest temple in Paro. *Chöd* is also known as the practice of “Cutting through the Ego,” and it is based on the *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) *Sutra* (Thaye, 2007). It combines *Prajñāpāramitā* philosophy with specific meditation methods and a tantric ritual. People

⁴⁴ Religious liturgy

of Bhutan, whether it be men or women, young or old, are highly inspired and interested in this practice. The practitioners gather twice a month to practice together and sometimes they go for week long retreats to remote and sacred places to practice it.

Bhutan also has its own unique way of welcoming and officiating important ceremonies with *marchang* (offering of the local *ara*⁴⁵) and *sedra* or *chibdral* (the traditional reception of the guests or dignitaries, escorted by the monks and special dances by religious figures and lay officers with special costumes and musical instruments). This special *marchang* offering and the *sedra* is not found in other Vajrayāna regions (Rigzin, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the calculation of the dates and time is also different.

Lastly, I will make a special mention of the *gomchen*, an important class of Buddhist practitioners in Bhutan, including my study area. When studying about the religious lives of Bhutanese women, it is imperative to distinguish between monastic (clerical) and the yogic (shamanic). Monastic Buddhism is institutionalised Buddhism “in which discipline, conduct, education, and power are governed by the monastic disciplinary code and by goals other than, but not necessarily contrary to, enlightenment. In contrast, the yogic dimension places its emphasis upon spiritual and societal transformation through yogic practice, relying on views of reality other than prevailing conventional norms”. (Simmer-Brown, 2002:31). Monastic Buddhism can be summarised as follows:

Monastic Buddhism shares with yogic Buddhism the ultimate goal of enlightenment, but it has other goals, related to monastic disciplinary codes and the continuity of monastic lineages and education. Monastic Buddhism places greater emphasis on the gradual path based upon purifying one's karma through accumulation of merit, renouncing unvirtuous actions, scholastic mastery of texts, debate, and preserving the monastic tradition. In this last area, monastic Buddhism is concerned with power and succession and institutional life. (Simmer-Brown, 2002:31)

In Bhutan, Buddhist practitioners are generally divided into three types, i.e. monks, nuns and *gomchen*. The monks and nuns are part of institutionalised Buddhism, i.e. monastic Buddhism whereas *yogīs*, *yoginīs* and *gomchen* follow yogic Buddhism. There

⁴⁵ Alcoholic brew, made from fermented rice.

is a very fine line between monastic and yogic Buddhism in the sense that monks and nuns who spend their lives meditating (as *yogīs* or *yoginīs*) have crossed from monastic into the yogic realm of Buddhism. Nonetheless, non-ordained people like *gomchen* are unable to cross into the monastic realm unless they take ordination. Monks and nuns stay in a monastic community and are supposed to observe vows of celibacy with a host of other vows but *gomchens* can marry and raise families and are very much part of the lay community, serving them as a spiritual supporter, advisor and consultant too (Tashi, 1999). Before the advent of modern education, *gomchen* were usually the most educated in the villages and thus the people needed them for different kinds of services. The wife of a *gomchen* or the female *gomchen* is also known as *gomchen* and they play a crucial role in supporting the work of *gomchen*. They help to raise the children according to Buddhist principles and encourage them to engage in spiritual practices. The female *gomchen* receives her training from her husband and their children's first education on how to read and write is from the mother, the female *gomchen*. When the *gomchen* takes in new young *gomchen* to train under him, it is the female *gomchen's* responsibility to provide food and shelter to him and also to educate them according to Buddhist principles. So the *gomchen* duties of both male and female are very important to the society. In some villages, they have their own *gomchen* centres to train the children to read and write Buddhist text and later some of these children choose to become monks (Tashi, 1999).

3.4 The Monastic Educational System of Bhutan

There are three types of monastic establishments for monks in Bhutan, namely *lobdra*, (schools for entry-level monks), *shedra*⁴⁶ (monastic college/institute) and *drubdra* (meditational centres, specifically focusing on retreats), listed in chronological order. In contrast, there are only three government supported nunneries (out of twenty-six

⁴⁶ *Shedra* learning takes 9 years while *lobdra* can take a maximum of 10 years of study

nunneries in Bhutan), as opposed to 207 government supported monastic institutions for monks (Bhutan Nuns Foundation, 2011). Two of the government supported nunneries do not have any of the above educational institutions (*lobdra*, *shedra* and *drubdra*). The nunneries are merely places for the nuns to stay and recite basic prayers. Only the newly-established (2012) nunnery in Gelephu has initiated a *lobdra*, the first such government supported monastic educational institute in Bhutan (Bhutan Nuns Foundation, 2011).

The monastic curriculum from the Dratshang Lhentshog, traditionally designed for monks and is still only available to monks in Bhutan, begins with the learning of the alphabet, spelling (Tib/Dzongkha: *zorlog*), reading (Dzongkha: *tshigdu*), proceeds to the memorization (Dzongkha: *chorjang*) of ritual and other relevant texts with the names and praises to the past religious masters of the Drukpa Kagyu and Nyingma traditions. Grammar (Tib/Dzongkha: *sumtag*) and prosody (Tib/Dzongkha: *nyengag*) or Literary Science (Tib/Dzongkha: *rigney*) are optional subjects, which are geared towards those interested in pursuing higher Buddhist philosophical studies. Once the students have attained a basic proficiency in the above skills, they graduate to lessons in sacred dance, the playing of monastic orchestra or musical instruments⁴⁷, the making of ritual objects, and the graphic arts. English and arithmetic have also been introduced in many of the monastic schools (Tib/Dzongkha: *lobdra*) (Rinzin, 1993; Tashi, 1999).

The actual Buddhist Philosophical studies in Bhutan comprise the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts (Skt: *prajñāpāramitā*, Tib: *sherchin/parchin*), Monastic Code of Conduct (Skt: *vinaya*, Tib: *dulva*), *Abhidharma*⁴⁸ (Tib: *ngonpa*), and the biographies (Tib: *togjoe*) of great realised masters of the past (Rinzin, 1993). There are thirteen main texts prescribed for the *shedra* curriculum which are shown in Appendix D. In addition, there

⁴⁷ such as horns (Tib: *dung*), trumpet (Tib: *kangdung*), (Tib: *gyaling*), drum (Tib: *ngah*), small drums (Skt: *damaru*, Tib: *tangti*), conch (Tib: *dungkar*), bell (Tib: *dilbu*) conjoined with vajra (Tib: *dorje*)

⁴⁸ One of the three 'baskets' (Tripiṭaka) of Buddhism, the other two being Sutra (the discourses of the Buddha) and Vinaya (monastic discipline). Abhidharma can be considered as the core of Buddhist Psychology with detailed explanations on the workings of the mind and its relationship with cyclic existence (Skt: *samsāra*) and enlightenment (Skt: *nirvana*).

are works on Buddhist Logic (Skt: *pramāṇa*, Tib: *tshadma*) which are part of the *shedra* curriculum.

After mastering Buddhist Philosophy and Logic, the monks' proceed to the meditational centres (Tib: *drubdra*) to practice meditation for a minimum of three years, referred to as *Losum Chogsum*⁴⁹. The main meditational course for the Drukpa Kagyu tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism is the Six Yogas of Naropa (Tib: *naro choedrug*). After completing the full monastic curriculum, the monks proceed to become abbots and teachers at the different government-run monastic institutions in Bhutan.

In contrast, nuns' education remained neglected throughout history when compared with the highly developed monks' monastic education system. Nuns remain in their dilapidated nunneries with seasonal⁵⁰ or no opportunity to learn the preliminaries of Buddhist education. The oldest nunneries being Jachung Karmo in Punakha and Kila Dechen Yangtse in Paro still lack basic water and sanitation facilities, let alone, monastic education (Wangmo Forthcoming; Wangmo, 2013). Nuns struggle with finances as their nunneries are located in very remote locations and local people, who are their only income source for their sustenance rarely visit as these nunneries are far. In addition, nuns have limited access to teachers who have to travel to their remote nunneries, often battling with harsh weather, travel and living conditions with little financial incentive to teach the nuns. Due to the lack of interest on the part of the monks to travel to the remote regions where the nunneries are located, Buddhist monastic education as outlined by Dratshang Lhentshog⁵¹ remains inaccessible to nuns in government-run nunneries in Bhutan like Jachung Karmo Nunnery (Wangmo, 2013). Of the three government-supported nunneries, only the Kila Dechen Yangtse has been promoted to a nuns' *shedra* (learning institute) in May 2013 and the nuns from this nunnery will be the first ones to appear for

⁴⁹ Literally translated as three years and three faces of a month (one and half months)

⁵⁰ Subject to the kindness of individual monks and nuns who choose to travel to these remote nunneries to teach the nuns with little or no stipend for their labour.

⁵¹ The Drukpa Kagyu theocracy is headed by the Dratshang Lhentshog (Commission for the Monastic Affairs) and operationalised by the Zhung Dratshang (the monastic body).

the Board Examination of Zhung Dratshang (The Central Monastic Body of Bhutan) (Dorji, 2013).

The void created by the Bhutanese government's lack of attention to Bhutanese nuns' spiritual development has been filled in part by forward-looking non-government linked Bhutanese religious masters. In the last decade, nunneries were established mostly by private Lamas and Khenpos. Nonetheless, even these private institutions have put very little emphasis on monastic education for nuns. The only nunnery where the first batch of nuns completed their nine years monastic study in 2009 is Pema Thegchok Choling Nyingmapa College in Bumthang, founded under the patronage of His Eminence, the 9th Gangteng⁵² Tulku Kunzang Pema Namgyal in 1998 (Wangmo, 2013). The first Gangteng Tulku Pema Thinley was the grandson of Terton (Treasure revealer) Pema Lingpa, one of the important figures we discussed in the religious history of Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2013).

3.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a general overview of Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan, emphasising the distinct Bhutanese form of Vajrayāna Buddhism compared with that of Tibet. The Bhutanese have very different language, religious and cultural practices from the Tibetans. Much of the Vajrayāna Buddhism of Bhutan is adopted from pre-Buddhist Bonpo traditions. Nonetheless, the Drukpa Kagyu School which is the main of two Vajrayāna Buddhist schools in Bhutan derives its roots from Tibet. The chapter introduced many male personalities who were instrumental in introducing and firmly establishing Buddhism in Bhutan but more importantly, highlighted androcentric tendencies of religious historians who failed to mention the contribution of female practitioners, especially nuns in the religious history of Bhutan. The three-tier traditional monastic education system in Bhutan was also discussed, while highlighting the deep

⁵² Sometimes spelt as Gangtey

disjuncture between accesses to monastic education for monks compared with nuns, further affirming the importance of this study as a means to bridge the gender gap in monastic education in Bhutan.

University of Malaya

CHAPTER 4: A JOURNEY INTO THE LIVES OF THE BUDDHIST WOMEN OF THE HIMALAYAS

4.1 Lower Birth—the Wretched Gender

“A whole new day.....at the break of dawn, the cry of a new-born baby fills the air amidst the chirping of birds and the fluttering of five-coloured mantra-printed prayer flags in a chilly breeze. The first cry of a new human life, resounding from a hamlet perched on a rugged terrain, overlooking the steep and deep valleys and green pastures far in the foreground. The mother, lying in exhaustion after a difficult delivery of her fifth child is greeted with looks of disgust by her disappointed husband; “It’s a girl....again!!!” In the blessed Land of Snows⁵³, the birth of a baby girl is no reason for celebration. Her very first cry, is “an inauspicious sign: she is an inferior sex and thus is called a lower-born” (Tib: *skye dmon*⁵⁴)” (Desal, 2004: 2). This is the first introduction of the women of the Himalayas.

Bokar Rinpoche (1999: 123), a very high *lama* in the Tibetan tradition acknowledged that the status of women in Buddhism “often appears to have been inferior to that of men”. Since the inception of life, most Himalayan women, spanning the regions of Ladakh, Zangskar, Spiti, Lahaul, Kinnaur, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh wish they were never born as females. Almost the entire Himalayan range people profess the Buddhist faith, specifically, Vajrayāna Buddhism, yet, there is little evidence of gender parity, not even in religious practice, which was ironically, one of the greatest reforms made by the historical Buddha. According to Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, one of the great contemporary women practitioners; “Tibetan Buddhism, as with all Buddhism, was basically hierarchical and patriarchal” (Malkin, 2009). Desal (2004: 2) makes a grim

⁵³ A synonym for Tibet

⁵⁴ Pronounced *kyemen*, derived from *Key Wa Men Pa*

summary of Tibetan women: “From the very beginning, it is the fate of women to be sucked into the whirlpool of suffering, to be confined by social convention, tradition, and superstition.”

Desal (2004), although writing about the struggle of being a woman in Tibet, echoes the voices of scores of women in the Himalayan region whose lives have been dictated by men from womb to the tomb. Desal describes Tibetan women as accepting social norms created by men which have subordinated them for generations such that these women lose their subjectivity and dignity and really live up to their pejorative title (inferior one). Women in Tibet unquestioningly subscribe to their given gendered roles and are entrenched in hardship and mistreatment from men in almost every stage of their life, by their fathers, husbands, in-laws and children. Desal cites some examples of women being the property of men as evidenced by their clothing; for example, married women in U-Tsang are required to wear aprons, in some areas of Kham to dress their hair with five ambers. These objects symbolise ownership by the husband and the husband’s stature, which is highly prized by women at the expense of losing their own identity (Desal, 2004).

Himalayan women face discrimination in virtually every sphere of life, be it equal wages for labour, choosing a spouse, equality in sexual life or rights to self-determination. In certain areas in Tibet, especially in the Kham region, women are made to marry all male siblings in the family so as to keep the property within the family, causing immense suffering, physically and mentally (Desal, 2004). Campbell (1996) observed that women in Tibetan Buddhism are generally discriminated in terms of access to monastic education, full ordination, ritual training, teaching roles and financial support for their spiritual practice. In addition, women are viewed as the source of *samsāra* and must be confined to the household. Schaeffer (2004) quotes a seventeenth-century hagiography of Guru Padmasambhava by Nyangral Nyima Ozer who described laywomen through his

androcentric lens; ascribing the following quote to the protagonist Guru Padmasambhava, the founding father of Tibetan and Bhutanese Buddhism:

In more domestic terms, they are the basis for the home, so they must keep the house clean. Women should listen well to whatever the good husband tells her, and accept the bad husband as simply a result of her past karmic actions. Since one's father and elder brothers are the backbone of the family, women should worship them like gods. Since women are singled out, they must keep up a pleasant demeanor. Women who talk too much cause rumors, and therefore the good woman should not move her lips too much. She should go to sleep late and awake early, work hard and complete all her labors. She should be kind and caring to the cattle and the guard dogs. (Schaeffer, 2004: 95)

This may have been a well-intended advice for women to cope with suffering, but it also sends a strong message that women have to endure all forms of suffering unquestioningly. Such statements on what men think how women should be, have contributed to gendered roles in spiritual practice. Campbell (1996) opines that patriarchal and misogynist attitudes toward women in Tibetan Buddhism were inherited from Indian Buddhism. Women's place is in the kitchen whereas a man's domain is the outside world, pursuing education, spirituality, name and fame. As such, traditionally, education and even religious life, was a privilege which only men could have. Makley (2007: 601) quotes a Tibetan proverb which succinctly expresses fundamental gendered spatial polarity:

The place where a young boy goes is a monastery;
The place where a young girl goes is her new husband's home⁵⁵

Thus, when Orgyan Chokyi, a famous sixteenth century Tibetan nun was young, her mother chided her for craving for an education and a spiritual life, advising her instead to conform to stereotyped gendered roles for Tibetan women:

Learning spinning and weaving is for you.....Do not create this mental suffering [referring to her craving for education and religious life] (Schaeffer, 2004: 98).

For hundreds of years, Buddhist women in the Himalayan region were deprived of education and leadership roles in religious practice, social and political life. Women in

⁵⁵ (Tib: *ban de 'gro sa sgar red/ byis mo 'gro sa gnas red*)

Tibet and the Himalayas have also been denied access to monastic education. According to Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, “That’s just the way it was,” she explains. “Traditionally, women were not educated and nuns also were not educated and therefore they played a much lower role in society, and as far as Buddhism was concerned, women had no voice” (Malkin, 2009). In present times, the situation has not significantly changed. Bhutanese women still lack access to monastic education which is also observed by Gutschow (2004) and Tsomo (2009) in their studies on women in Zangskar (Jammu and Kashmir, India) and Spiti Valley (Himachal Pradesh, India) respectively.

Himalayan women’s primary occupation is to tend to the fields or perform hard labour such as gathering firewood and water from far distances, weaving and in modern times, as menial labourers for roadworks etc. In addition they must perform all the domestic chores of cooking, washing, cleaning and effectively play their reproductive role as mothers, even to the extent of taking the burden of supporting their families. The situation of women in Bhutan and the Himalayan region is almost similar to most areas of the Tibetan diaspora (Gutschow, 2004; Tsomo, 2009; Zangmo, 2009).

Since women were mostly involved in unpaid work in the field and at home, women tended to be subordinated and discriminated by the male members of their society (Desal, 2004; Gutschow, 2004; Tsomo, 2009, Zangmo, 2009). On the other hand, the common trend in the Himalayas is that a large number of men are underemployed and indulge in substance abuse. Others leave their villages to supplement the family through wage work as traders, drivers, government workers, and teachers, leaving women to fend for themselves, their children and the aged (Gutschow, 2004; Tsomo, 2009; Zangmo, 2009).

Further, the conditions are worsened by women themselves as they never question the discrimination and inequality but faithfully adhere to the norms made by men. Many choose not to as any attempt to bridge the gender gap in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism is met with resistance, especially from the clergy, as we will discuss in Chapter Six during

the discussion of full ordination for nuns in the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition. Women who tried to challenge gendered roles generally succumb to the “overwhelming power of tradition” Desal (2004: 5). Desal laments that “contemporary Tibetan society cannot tolerate those who know how to think independently, who have a strong personality, and whose concerns appear conflicting with any of men's interests” Desal (2004: 9). Simmer-Brown (2002: 29) cites an example of her conversation with Tibetan *lamas* and *Rinpoches* that travel to the west who are extremely bothered by feminist criticism of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism:

"Everywhere we go, everyone always asks us about *dākinīs*." Yes, I replied, Western students are very interested in *dākinīs* and in enlightened women teachers. "No," he corrected me. "They don't ask because they are interested. They ask to embarrass us. They want to criticize our tradition."

Ironically, Tibetan Buddhist *lamas* who teach students to develop equanimity and transcend the eight worldly concerns⁵⁶ are themselves bothered by criticism. Buddhism teaches about suffering and the way out of suffering and if a Buddhist tradition itself inflicts suffering on women and when women try to find ways out of such suffering, the male clergy who want to maintain the status-quo become defensive and accuse women of trying to bring disrepute on the tradition. This is exactly what happened to me during the course of this study.

During my fieldwork in Bhutan, I experienced resistance, especially from male clergy, *gomchen* and high ranking officials of my country. Although I have received support from the Dratshang Lhentshog (Commission for the Monastic Affairs) in terms of access to both nunneries in Punakha and Pemagatshel, I received much resistance on the ground which hampered my fieldwork and caused unnecessary delays. I have been viewed with suspicion and even persuaded by high ranking officials not to reveal sensitive elements such as sexual abuses of nuns in my thesis in order to maintain the good name of the monastic institution and my country in general. I firmly believe that if I conceal

⁵⁶ The eight worldly concerns are the dualities of praise and blame, fame and defame, pleasure and pain; and gain and loss.

information to suit the needs of certain sectors of society, I will not be doing justice to the subjects of this study, the Bhutanese nuns whom I am very much a part of. Hence, my story on the Bhutanese nuns is not merely an anthropological curiosity, but a means for social justice to bridge the gender gap in religious practice. I acknowledge that there are many positive aspects to women's life in the Himalayas but the general status of women is low and their roles gendered. This thesis is not an exercise in male-bashing or an attack on Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, as might be misunderstood especially by male clergy, but an effort to portray the discrimination which Himalayan women have to face in every sphere of their lives, even in the religious realm. The Buddha himself challenged social norms for the betterment of women. If the situation of women has degraded in the name of Buddhism, then remedial measures are in order, hence the need for this study.

This chapter completes the backdrop to my study on gendered roles in religious practice in Bhutan. The discussion on Himalayan women and nuns in general is extremely pertinent to my study because firstly, Himalayan women though diverse in culture and languages, are essentially bonded by one uniting factor, Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. Since the advent of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism in the Himalayan region beginning late 7th century C.E., men and women in the Himalayas have been conditioned by their religion, both positively and negatively. In the preceding chapter, we have seen how Indian Buddhism had been transplanted to Tibet, Bhutan and the rest of the Himalayan region. The common spiritual ancestor in Tibetan Buddhism is the historical Buddha and Guru Padmasambhava, the latter being more influential than the founder of Buddhism itself. The region utilises common Buddhist texts and differ only slightly in ritual detail and perhaps, lineage. Thus, a biography of Guru Padmasambhava in Bhutan would be identical to the one utilised in Tibet or Zangskar as the religious texts are inherited from Tibet. Moreover, the essential doctrinal foundation is the same for all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, *Prasangika Mādhyamaka* of Nāgārjuna. The difference in religious texts and

biographies only occurs at a later stage when Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism flourished in different areas within the Himalayas. Nonetheless, the roots of Tibetan Buddhism lies in Tibet and it is not incorrect to deduce that there is a correlation between Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan and elsewhere in the Himalayas.

Secondly, I argue that the entire Himalayan region had pre-Buddhist practices such as Bon and propitiation of local deities which was steeped in concerns about purity and impurity that have impacted the way women are viewed in the region. Through my years of interaction with Buddhist nuns from other parts of the Himalayas and supporting literature from scholars such as Gutschow (2004) who conducted an ethnographical study on nuns in Zangskar, India; Desal's (2004) insights on women in Tibet as well as Campbell's (1996), Gross' (1996), Schaeffer's (2004) and Tsomo's (2009) analysis of the situation of women in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism in general; I infer that there are far more similarities than differences between the nuns of the Himalayas. Hence, the background of Buddhist women of the Himalayas is a fitting introduction to the subjects of my study, the Bhutanese nuns.

4.2 Prayer of a Himalayan Buddhist Woman — “May I be Reborn in a Male Body”

The very term for female in the Tibetan language carries a pejorative overtone. Studying the semantics in greater detail, terms like, "lower rebirth" (Tib: *skye dmon*) or "black one" (Tib: *nag mo*) refer to the female body as an unfortunate existence, of lower status than men and as Gutschow (2004: 212) calls it, "... a calamity and punishment". Aziz (1987) and Gross (1996) observed that the word *skye dmon* (pronounced *kyemen*) is derived from Tibetan folk wisdom that notes the hardships women have to face under patriarchy and is not related to doctrine. Apart from conventional terms for women, girl children are sometimes given derogatory names to express parents' dismay at the birth of

a girl. When Orgyan Chokyi, was born in Dolpo, Tibet, her parents named her Kyilo, i.e. “Happiness Dashed” (Schaeffer, 2004: 98), speaking volumes about the worth of the female in the Tibetan plateau.

The Tibetans and people of the Himalayan region, including the Bhutanese exalt the male body because of the belief that it is the result of “greater stores of merit” (Tib. *bsod nams*) from past lifetimes (Makley, 2007: 601). Conversely, the female body is regarded as a retribution body, believed to be the result of evil deeds (negative karma) done in previous births, hence its very nature is that of suffering. Since this is the case, Tibetan women have to work harder than men to earn sufficient merits. There is a Tibetan idiom which illustrates that women are at least seven lifetimes behind men; needing an additional seven lifetimes of merit before they can secure rebirth in a male body (Gutschow, 2004). The Bhutanese version adds another extra two lifetimes, to nine lifetimes behind men (Crins, 2008). Therefore, women in the Himalayan region have a lot of catching up to do, hence their pre-occupation with merit-making, as we will see in the sections to come.

4.2.1 Concerns about Impurity

The Buddha’s basic teachings are very clear on what constitutes purity and impurity. The Buddha, as quoted in the *Dhammapada* (Verse 160) said that the only impurity that matters is the impurity of the mind caused by mental defilements and one’s primary task is to remove mental impurities through systematic mind training, i.e. meditation:

Evil is done by oneself,
By oneself is one defiled
Evil is left undone by oneself,
By oneself is one cleansed
Purity and impurity are one’s own doing,
No one purifies another,
No other purifies one. (Dhammapada Verse 160)

The Buddha rejected the idea of external impurity associated with caste and gender. The Buddha also “disavowed the power of the Brahman priests to purify others in early Indian society” (Gutschow, 2004: 200). Yet, in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, especially in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, monks and laypeople alike are very much preoccupied with notions of purity and impurity. Purity is associated with cleansing and the male body; whilst female body, with impurity. Gutschow (2004: 2) highlights the following list of impurities as per Tibetan Buddhist ideology: “women, corpses, outcastes, adultery, childbirth, death, menstruation, urine, feces, sweat, blood, pus, phlegm, spit, hair, skin, fingernails, and placentas” as potent impurity. It is evident that many of the impurities mentioned are associated with women, by virtue of biological processes such as menstruation and childbirth. In Thai society, the female genital organ itself is considered to be imbued with impurities; “inferior, polluted, taboo, ugly, and hidden” while the “male genital organ is considered to be superior and symbolically related to prosperity and wealth” (Falk (2010: 106) quotes Pimpawun Boonmongkon).

Falk (2010) attributed concerns about women’s so-called inherent impurity as a major contributing factor to women’s subordination. To be specific, it is the ritual practices and taboos associated with the female body that perpetuates the cycle of subordination, especially those related to rites of passage such as puberty, marriage and even childbirth. Rites of purification and fear associated with these ‘impurities’ “reinforce a gender hierarchy in which the female is defective or inferior” (Gutschow, 2004: 17).

The Himalayan region is steeped with fear of female pollution (Tib: *grib can*) and the local culture dictates necessary ritual cleansing for natural events such as childbirth. For example, Gutschow noted that in Kargil (Jammu and Kashmir, India), women are made to give birth in stables to avoid polluting their houses. In Bhutan, women can give birth at home but the house will be ritually purified three days after childbirth by those who can conduct the *lhabsang* (literally meaning ‘deity smoke’) ceremony, usually monks or

gomchen. During the three-day taboo period, no visitors are allowed to the house until the purification ceremony is complete. Even weddings are considered polluting events, as observed by Gutschow (2004) in Zangskar, India and Crins (2008) in Bhutan. Thus, ritual purification is crucial to restore the purity of the house and village to avoid any misfortune.

Concerns about female impurity are even greater in sacred spaces such as temples (Tib: *lhakhang*) and protector houses (Dzongkha: *goenkhana*) or even household altars (Dzongkha: *choesham*). In Zangskar, women are to avoid all village and household altars (Tib: *lha tho*) as well as temples while menstruating (Gutschow, 2004). This restriction is also common in Thai and Tibetan society (Falk, 2010; Makley, 2003). All women, even when not menstruating, including those who have reached menopause and celibate ascetics (nuns) are not allowed to enter sacred spaces which house Tantric protectors (Tib: *mgon po, chos skyong*) or participate in the worship of clan and village deities (Tib: *pha'i lha, yul lha*), as is the case of Zangskar (Gutschow, 2004).

The injunction against women entering sacred spaces, especially the chapels housing Tantric protectors are often rationalised based on two reasons, as observed by Gutschow (2004: 209), firstly, for fear of women becoming sick or infertile “when they confront fierce Tantric statues with their erect phalluses”, or because the protectors are “offended through being contaminated by women”.

Apart from pollution in sacred space, pollution in relation to land and agriculture is believed to have the potential to threaten food security and the very survival of the people. Since agriculture is the primary source of sustenance in the Himalayan region, including Bhutan, farmers are especially careful about not offending subterranean spirits to ensure fertility. They believe that if the spirits are offended because of female impurity, then there will be disturbances in the rain and snowfall patterns which would be disastrous to crops (Gutschow, 2004).

Due to centuries of cultural conditioning, even Buddhist nuns are convinced that their bodies are polluting agents. Gutschow (2004: 209) quotes a Zangskari nun explaining about these interdictions: "Women's bodies are distasteful and give off a bad smell [when menstruating]...Thus, they shouldn't enter divine places." However, Buddhist and especially feminist scholars are not convinced about the inherent impurity of the female body. Scholars such as Gross (1996), Gutschow (2004) and Falk (2010) are highly suspicious of notions of female impurity and criticize it as a scapegoat used to draw attention away from lapses in morality and ritual. Gutschow (2004: 204) cites an example of women being blamed for severe drought in Zangskar because they washed their menstrual clothes in a streambed. Gutschow argues that preoccupation with female impurity is a ploy to masquerade the real reasons behind troubling events, such as misconduct, lack of devotion and social disharmony. Also, in Bhutan, women who challenged social norms by playing games such as archery and darts (traditionally reserved for men) are being blamed for natural disasters in Bhutan (Kuensel, 2010). Bhutanese in rural areas believe that even animals born with deformities can spell catastrophe for the entire village and these 'abominable' creatures are killed to rid the village of disaster (Kuensel, 2009).

In the Himalayan region, lapses in observance of injunctions concerning impurities are usually rectified by monks (Gutschow, 2004) similar to the manner in which Brahmanical priests were engaged in purification ceremonies in India. Although there are many types of impurities, the only possible means of restoring impurity is by ritual, astrology, medicine or customary law (Gutschow, 2004). Purification rituals are one of the primary activities of the monks in relation to the laity as it is a major source of sustenance for them and their monasteries.

4.2.2 Women as Temptresses

Apart from being a source of pollution, Gutschow (2004: 212) noted other undesirable qualities or circumstances arising from a female body: “It is miserable or woeful (*lan chag can*) because it is more vulnerable to rape and adultery. Finally, it is called sinful (*sdig pa can*) because women have more desire.” Schaeffer (2004: 98) very articulately captured the essence of how a female body is viewed in Tibetan Buddhist society:

...the female body is not merely a symbol of *saṃsāra*, nor receptacle for the seeds of *saṃsāra*. It is *saṃsāra*. To be female, according to her Life, is to be *saṃsāra* embodied.

The traditional Buddhist notion that women are associated with the seeds of *saṃsāra* is generally in relation to the spiritual practice of men. Men are discouraged to have any dealings or contact with women who are deemed the highest source of temptation in *saṃsāra*. Falk (2010) noted that patriarchal societies such as Thai society consider women as threats to monks’ celibacy, which is also similar in Tibetan Buddhism (Gutschow, 2004). Scriptural testimonies to such a notion in Tibetan Buddhism include Samten Lingpa’s seventeenth-century hagiography of Mandarava, Guru Padmasambhava’s Indian female consort. Schaeffer (2004: 93) quotes a misogynistic passage from the hagiography attributed to the Guru by Samten Lingpa:

When Padmasambhava arrives on the scene he continues the theme: “Unending *saṃsāra* is woman!” “Women are the rope of the lord of death, for if you trust it you are ensnared by death.” And if that is not enough, he concludes that women are “black-headed demons who give birth to the molten coppers of hell,” in which people boil, burn, and suffer. They are “the pit from which the molten coppers of hell overflow to the skies. (Schaeffer, 2004: 93)

In addition, I draw from the autobiography of a famous Tibetan Buddhist master, Dorji Lingpa who is also highly revered by the Bhutanese. Dorji Lingpa was just as concerned as his predecessors about women being threats to men’s spiritual pursuits and encouraged men wanting to pursue spirituality to meditate in solitude to ensure complete disconnection from women:

Learning and taking “refuge” when hoping one day to expound classics and philosophy One sees them sinking in the impure mud of women! I, Dorje Lingpa depart to meditate in solitude.

Starting to learn how to meditate when hoping to become a spiritual master their minds are seized by the lap of women! I, Dorje Lingpa depart to meditate in solitude..... (Karmay, 2000: 14)

I cite another example from the hagiography of Guru Padmasambhava. The author of this hagiography, Nyangral Nyima Ozer is quoted by Schaeffer (2004: 94) as saying:

Monks, he prescribes, should participate in a long-standing tradition. They should “receive the vows and the precepts . . . from learned monks who bear witness to the code of a preceptor and teacher.” They should avoid attachments, remain in the monastic community sequestered from lay households, and they should keep away from women, even mothers and sisters. (Schaeffer, 2004: 94)

The Buddha stressed similar restraint for women. Sutras from early Buddhism cited both men and women as equal sources of temptations to one another’s spiritual practice. In the *Ekaka Nipāta Pāḷi* of the *Aṅguttāra Nikāya* (Pāḷi canon), the Buddha is quoted as saying,

There is no one sight, sound, smell, taste and touch other than that of a woman which can captivate and distract the mind of man; conversely there is no one sight, sound, smell, taste and touch other than that of a man which can captivate and distract the mind of a woman. (paras 1 to 10).

In Tibetan Buddhist literature, there are passages whereby nuns are also advised to stay away from men in their spiritual practice, but these are generally peppered with misogynistic statements about women’s inherent inferiority. In the same hagiography by Nyangral, Guru Padmasambhava advises nuns thus:

“Women who have cast off *saṃsāra* and become nuns,” he begins, “because of your low rebirth due to bad actions, it is inconceivable that you will become learned.” Nevertheless, there are limited goals to which the religiously oriented woman should aspire: Sever your attachment to men, and uphold the precepts fully. Do not go to where householders dwell, but stay in a nunnery. Study the teachings and accrue what virtue you can. Recite prayers and be energetic in circumambulation and prostration. Uphold your vows without hypocrisy or deceit. (Schaeffer, 2004: 94)⁵⁷

Although passages such as these exist which balances men and women as equal temptations to each other’s spiritual practice, Buddhist literature on women being a stain on men’s celibacy are far greater in number than vice-versa.

⁵⁷ In her writings, Schaeffer (2004) is highly suspicious of the hagiography of Nyangral and opines that the biography does not contain much factual truth but have been written by Nyangral who brings with him his cultural baggage of patriarchal values, which explains such misogynistic statements which Schaeffer (2004) argues could not have come from an enlightened master such as Guru Padmasambhava.

4.2.3 The Auspicious Male Body

Buddhist texts, as discussed in the second chapter of this thesis abound with stories of the limitation and inferiority of the female body in achieving enlightenment. The protagonists of these stories, who are usually bodhisattva females aspiring for enlightenment are told by their male teachers or monks in general that it is not possible to get enlightened in a female body. An oft cited story by feminists and Tibetan *lamas* on enlightenment in a female body is that of Tára, who is the most revered buddha in female form in Tibet. Tára, when she was a *bodhisattva* (Buddhahood aspirant) called Wisdom Moon (Tib: *Yeshe Dawa*); was advised by monks to aspire for a male rebirth, which they believed was the only way a woman could be enlightened (Rinpoche B. , 1999). Tára paid no heed to their ‘advice’ and eventually attained enlightenment, in a female body!

Yet another example of literature on female inferiority is from the works of the great early Indian Buddhist scholar, Shantideva in his *Bodhicāryavatāra (The Bodhisattva Way of Life)* in which there is a phrase beckoning the holy beings to shower blessings on the unfortunate females with the following aspiration prayer: "May all female beings become male!" (cited in Rinpoche, 1999: 123). Bokar Rinpoche nonetheless explains that Shantideva did not regard women as inferior beings but was writing from the perspective of women’s position in ancient India whose position for spiritual practice was unfavourable. There is a similar prayer in the *Aspiration for Rebirth in the Pureland of Sukhavati* which hopes for women never to be reborn as female.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo once casually asked His Holiness the Dalai Lama: “What is it about the male body that is so special and has to do with attaining the goal of the spiritual path?” His Holiness simply reaffirmed the Buddha’s assertion that gender is no barrier in achieving enlightenment: “...male or female body—it made no difference” (Malkin, 2000). This affirmation by the Dalai Lama is based on what Sponberg (1992) termed as soteriological inclusiveness, i.e. both men and women have equal potential to attain

enlightenment, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. This is supported by the Buddha nature (Skt: *tathāgatagarbha*) doctrine in Mahāyāna Buddhism whereby all beings have Buddha nature, i.e. the seed (inherent potentiality) of enlightenment is “shared universally by all beings, it does not belong, therefore, more to men than women” (Rinpoche, 1999: 124). Moreover, texts on preliminary practices (Tib: *ngondro*) in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism outline a different set of criteria being potential for enlightenment, which has nothing to do with gender, i.e. securing a precious human rebirth. According to Bokar Rinpoche’s (1999) explanation:

It need not only be a human existence⁵⁸ but a life containing a 'certain number of characteristics without which a spiritual progression would not be possible. One counts ten indispensable conditions [and] five conditions inherent in the person [i.e.] - human condition, being born in a country where the dharma⁵⁹ has spread, having possession of all senses, that is, the faculties of communication that allow one to understand the dharma, not pursuing an occupation in conflict with the Buddhist precepts and having faith in the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, and Samgha); five outer factors [are], a buddha must have manifested on Earth, he or she must have taught the dharma, the teaching must be alive, the teaching must be known, the structures to spread the teaching must be supported by disciples.” (Rinpoche, 1999: 125)

Since all four schools of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism subscribe to the *ngondro* practices as a prerequisite for following the Vajrayāna path, especially before receiving tantric instructions, concerns about gender are irrelevant. Bokar Rinpoche (1999) aptly summarised the gender debate on enlightenment with this piece of advice: “If practice is done, whether one is a man or a woman, one will obtain a result. If practice is not done, no result will be attained, regardless of whether one is a man or a woman, or even if one has a favorable human existence.” (Rinpoche, 1999: 126).

4.2.4 Impact on Women

Centuries of propaganda about the inherent inferiority of women by religionists in the Himalayas is bound to produce indelible mark on women’s psyche. One such impact is

⁵⁸ Meaning that only being human is not sufficient for a birth to be termed as ‘precious human rebirth’. One needs to fulfil the criteria of ten endowments and five leisures.

⁵⁹ A common synonym for the teachings of the Buddha

the low levels of self-confidence and self-worth of Himalayan women. From the time they are born, women in the Himalayas know that the female sex is a disadvantaged one. They begin to experience male gender as the norm and theirs as the 'other'. Quoting from the autobiography⁶⁰ of the mother of the present Dalai Lama of Tibet, Gyalyum Chenmo Deki Tsering reflects:

I always felt heavy about being a girl. From a very young age on, we knew the difference between the family's expectation for a boy and that for a girl, we were aware of the correlation between one's sex and one's position in the family. The distance between men's world and that of women is as far as between the North and South Poles. Every child recognized the inequality between the two sexes (Desal, 2004: 5).

Makley (2003) observed that some Tibetan women have immense inferiority complex which not only translated into their speech and actions, but also ingrained in their body language. Makley recalled one incident whereby her Tibetan women companions were profoundly embarrassed about their female bodies in front of high male clergy. She describes in detail how women in Tibet carried themselves in front of high male *lamas*:

Their bodies registered all the ways Tibetans display respect and status inferiority: Hats off, shoulders hunched and forward, eyes down, they touched their foreheads to the walls at the feet of every deity depicted there. They would not speak, except when one of them, sweating profusely, whispered to me that she was afraid. (Mackley, 2003: 606)

Since female birth is deemed inferior, women in the Himalayan region are less respected than men. Even if a woman was to hold a position of power, she would not command the same respect as a man would. I recall the story of the late Ani Pachen, a freedom fighter and nun in mid twentieth century Tibet who in her early years took over her father's estate and position as a local chieftain after his demise. In her autobiography, she reminisced about an incident when she summoned one of her subjects for an audience:

In the past, he always came at my father's first summons. His lack of response was a sign of disrespect. I sensed that because I was a woman, he did not respect me and was trying to undermine my authority. (Pachen and Donnelley, 2000: 111)

⁶⁰ Dalai Lama, My Son

There is also tendency, ingrained in local culture for generations which have greatly impacted the way men and women view their own bodies, i.e. “Male bodies are rewards for past merit or virtue; female bodies are to be reviled and rejected” (Gutschow, 2004: 17). As such, Tibetan women and generally, all women in the Himalayas as well as in traditional Buddhist countries such as Thailand pray to be reborn in a male body and to do that, women must engage in lots of merit-making activities to ensure a favourable male body in future lives (Gutschow, 2004; Schaeffer, 2004; Falk, 2010). Because of the intense experience of suffering in the female body, many famous female practitioners made deep aspirations to be reborn in a male body. Princess Trompa Gyen recounted her difficulties as a female dharma practitioner to her guru in this way:

Our minds seek virtue in the Dharma
but girls are not free to follow it.
Rather than risk a lawsuit,
we stay with even bad spouses.
Avoiding bad reputations,
we are stuck in the swamp of cyclic existence. . . .
Though we stay in strict, isolated retreat,
we encounter vile enemies.
Though we do our Dharma practices,
bad conditions and obstacles interfere. . . .
Next time let me obtain a male body,
and become independent,
so that I can exert myself in the Dharma
and obtain the fruition of buddhahood. (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 34)

Even the great nun, Orgyan Chokyi made the following aspiration for her next life, “May I never be born in a female body in any rebirth. Having attained a male body, may I be able to sustain pure conduct.” (Schaeffer, 2004: 101). Since most Himalayan women aspire for male rebirth which they are told is a result of vast stores of merit, the next course of action is to secure the merits through merit-making, the Buddhist passport to better rebirths.

4.2.5 Merit-making

Merit-making is not just a Tibetan Buddhist idea of how women can make up for being embodied in a female body, but it pervades the entire Buddhist landscape of South and

Southeast Asia (Schaeffer; 2004; Falk, 2010). It is akin to the last and *only* hope for women to transcend the trappings of a female body in order to secure the auspicious male body. In Thailand, women make extensive offerings and throng temples to listen to sermons by monks on ways to get a ticket to male rebirth. Women are told that great merits are earned by making generous donations to monks and temples. Monks of course, continuously preach the idea of better rebirth through donation to monks as women are vital supporters of the clergy (Skt: *samgha*). Women in the Tibetan plateau are told that since they lack merits from past lives, they are bound to suffer as females with fewer opportunities to improve their prospects in future lives. One sure way out of female suffering is by making faithful and extensive offerings to the three jewels of Buddhism, which eventually benefits the monks. Schaeffer (2004: 95), drawing once again from the androcentric hagiography by Nyangral, notes the following advice to women by Guru Padmasambhava:

....Tibetan women should make faithful offerings to the three jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Samgha. If the Tibetan laywoman acts in this manner, Nyangral (in the voice of Padmasambhava) assures us, she will fulfill the proper secular behavior and accumulate virtue for this life and the next. (Schaeffer, 2004: 95)

If one's own merits are insufficient, one other method to secure male rebirth, especially applicable to mothers is to have their sons ordained as Buddhist monks. Thai women, who are denied access to monasticism hope to cling on to the robes of their sons in the afterlife and traverse directly to the higher realms or return to the human realm in a male body (Falk, 2010).

In the Himalayan region, the system of merit-making is deeply entrenched in the minds of the local peoples. Since the laypeople are engaged in household activities and have little time for serious dharma practice, the only way of ensuring a good rebirth “as males or monks at the top of the social hierarchy” (Gustchow: 2004: 17) is by merit-making. Both men and women indulge in merit-making and have no reason to deconstruct this

system of patronage because they hope to be the beneficiaries of this system, provided that they earn enough merits to be reborn as male and enter into monkhood.

4.3 Himalayan Women in the Religious Realm

Merit-making revolves around offering requisites, labour and worship to the Three Jewels of Buddhism. In the Tibetan Buddhist system, the direct beneficiaries of this system are monks, especially incarnate *lamas* (Tib. *sprul sku*⁶¹), i.e. “men who are considered to be incarnations of deities or previously enlightened lamas” (Makley, 2003: 601) followed by nuns and *gomchens*. One would be hard-pressed to find female *trulkus* although there were and still are many enlightened female masters in Tibet and elsewhere in the Himalayas.

While nuns are also objects of merit, since they lack the status as fully ordained nuns and the training to perform certain rites and rituals, such as tantric empowerments and fire *pūjās* (especially those associated with purification); they are generally deprived of requisites and reverence by the laypeople (Gutschow, 2004). Some Ladakhi villages are known to have turned away nuns empty-handed (Gutschow, 2004). Although the Zangskari villagers are more respectful of nuns, nuns who lack institutional support of nunneries or ritual expertise which are usually the major sources of sustenance for monastics, have “little choice but to work on local estates for a wage” (Gutschow, 2004: 78). It is because of lack of sustenance that many Himalayan nuns are confined to their homes although they are supposed to have gone forth into homelessness.

⁶¹ “Pronounced ‘trulku’...status that lent them miraculous powers to transcend space and time, to tame demons to the service of Buddhism, and to teach Buddhist knowledge (Makley, 2003: 601)

4.3.1 Lack of Access to Full Ordination

To understand the life of a Himalayan nun, it is imperative to touch on the subject of full ordination. Vajrayāna as well as Theravāda Buddhist nuns have no access to full ordination. Monks still refuse to reinstate this privilege accorded to women by the Buddha (Gutschow, 2004; Tsomo, 2009; Falk, 2010). Lacking full ordination status, nuns in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition especially, are excluded from performing certain rites and rituals. Even if they perform rites for the laypeople, nuns are the second choice as the laity prefers monks because they believe that monks' efficacy is greater (Gutschow, 2004). In the context of Vajrayāna Buddhism, performing rituals for the laypeople is a means of economic sustenance for the *saṃgha*. If women are not invited to perform rituals such as prayers for the sick and deceased, they are unable to sustain economically and have to fall back on their families or monks for their basic sustenance. Nuns are also unable to perform esoteric Buddhist rites such as tantric initiations and empowerments even though they may have completed all the necessary retreats associated with the tantric practice. A nun's life of servitude to the family and monks renders them little time for spiritual practice or advanced study of Buddhist philosophy. The issue of full ordination will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

4.3.2 Servitude to family and monks

Himalayan women have generally two options in life, either marriage, which is the traditional option or the religious life. Both options are very much confined to the home as monasteries for women are sadly lacking. Many Himalayan nuns play a crucial role at home as their primary task is to support their family, especially ageing parents. In return for their food and shelter, nuns have to work for their families, usually in the farm as labour is scarce or tend to their siblings' offspring as babysitters. For example, in Zangskar, regardless of whether they marry or become nuns, daughters represent a cost

(Gutschow, 2004). Although unlike laywomen who are traded in marriage: “nuns’ families ‘exchange’ them for merit and the promise of service” (Gutschow, 2004: 124). Many of the nuns is expected to remain filial to their parents as well as provide labour for their nunneries and natal homes. These nuns, therefore, simply do not have time for spiritual practice (Gustchow, 2004; Tsomo, 2009; Zangmo, 2009). Moreover, the dependency of nuns on their families reduces their power and prestige which perpetuates the cycle of poverty and hardship of Himalayan nuns and keeps them as second class monastics, below monks. In many ways, the lives of many Himalayan Buddhist nuns are not much different from laywomen in terms of their productive role. Nuns only differ from laywomen in that they do not play a reproductive role because nuns are celibate ascetics.

Himalayan nuns generally play a double role, as dutiful daughters who tend to households, and as free labour for the laity and monks (Gutschow, 2004). Institutional androcentricism demands that nuns serve the monks in various capacities. Nuns dutifully live up to these expectations as a means of sustenance, at the expense of their religious practice as they end up spending the bulk of their time doing chores. Gutschow (2004) observed that Zangskari women provide labour to monks in return for religious instructions. Orgyan Chokyi, the sixteenth-century Tibetan nun wrote in her autobiography that as a young novice she too worked as a horse keeper and kitchen servant in return for Nyingma teachings from her master (Schaeffer, 2004). The Bhutanese nuns in one of the nunneries I studied also face a similar situation, to be discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis.

4.3.3 Access to Monastic Education

Himalayan nuns in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition⁶² lack access to secular and monastic education. Academic institutions or nunneries for women are very few, compared with institutions for monks. Tsomo (2009) attributed this to the male dominated society and clergy who feel that logic and metaphysics is not necessary for nuns as the former subscribe to the myth that women are incapable of abstract thinking, logical reasoning and pursuing monastic studies, which is linked to Sponberg's (1992) argument on ascetic misogyny. The only few learning places for nuns and women are in Nepal and India which leaves behind the nuns of Bhutan, Mongolia, Tibet and Buryatia (Russia).

The nuns of the Himalayan region lacked access to education, ordination and resources until the 1980s and thus they focused on the primary practice on chanting, ritual and meditation. When the Tibetans went into exile in India - when the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, nunneries were built for nuns in India, but they were still not given access to monastic education (Tsomo, 2009). The nuns could receive Buddhist teachings in private or in public gatherings but not through the systematic Buddhist studies which have traditionally been accorded to the monks. The nunneries were also located in secluded areas where the people could not reach them. Nonetheless, we see remarkable changes that occurred in the lives of the nuns in Tibetan settlements in Nepal and India, where nuns with the help of western nuns and women, managed to set up education programme and nunnery institutes for Buddhist women throughout the Himalayan region.

Tsomo (2009) through her own experience with the Spiti nuns stresses that to achieve gender parity in the religious realm, education opportunities should be given to nuns and women through proper and established nunneries which gives education on both monastic and secular studies. Tsomo (2009) cited some success stories in the Himalayan region in terms of providing opportunities for women to pursue monastic life and breakaway from

⁶² There are Himalayan nuns (in Nepal) in the Theravada Buddhist tradition

the cycle of poverty and male subordination. Through Jamyang Foundation, Tsomo (2009) reports that a number of nunneries in Spiti, Kinnaur and Ladakh in Northern India have been set up to eliminate poverty and discrimination of the nuns and laywomen. Hence, there are signs of improvement in the educational opportunities available to women and a corresponding increase in women's participation in religious affairs.

There are some outstanding nuns who overcame all these hardships and managed to accomplish the degrees equal to the monks for themselves as well as their fellow nuns and all sentient beings. The nuns from almost all the nunneries in Nepal and India also come together for a month to debate known as *Jang-gun Choe* or winter debate session which was only available to monks in the past (Tsomo, 2009).

Now both nuns and laywomen move boldly without any hesitation and free from the shadows of men though some village women still lament on their childbearing as they think it is a waste of their lives. Some nuns from these regions have gone to Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, North India to study in monasteries and now many of them have completed their studies equal to Geshe (equivalent to academic Ph.D.) degree which was beyond the wildest imaginations in the past for the nuns as such structured study programmes in Buddhist Philosophy was accessible only to monks (Tsomo, 2009).

Despite the positive changes happening to nuns elsewhere in the Himalayan region, Bhutanese nuns continue to be denied access to monastic education, especially in government-run nunneries.

4.3.4 Tantra, *ḍākinī* and Sexual Abuse

The *ḍākinī* is a very important symbol in *tantra* practice, which is the core of Vajrayāna Buddhism. In *tantra*, the *ḍākinī* represents the “inner wisdom-mind of the tantric practitioner” (Simmer-Brown: 2002: 33) and also symbolises the wisdom mind of the guru and enlightened beings. In Vajrayāna Buddhist lore, the *ḍākinī* is generally

symbolised in the feminine aspect, appearing as female deity to guide and protect tantric practitioners. Tantra categorises the *ḍākinī* in four ways, namely secret, inner, outer and outer-outer in accordance with the Practice Vehicle (Skt: *anuttāra-yoga-yana*):

On a secret level, she is seen as the manifestation of fundamental aspects of phenomena and the mind, and so her power is intimately associated with the most profound insights of Vajrayāna meditation. In this her most essential aspect, she is called the formless wisdom nature of the mind itself. On an inner, ritual level, she is a meditational deity, visualized as the personification of qualities of buddhahood. On an outer, subtle-body level, she is the energetic network of the embodied mind in the subtle channels and vital breath of tantric yoga. She is also spoken of as a living woman: she may be a guru on a brocaded throne or a *yoginī* meditating in a remote cave, a powerful teacher of meditation or a guru's consort teaching directly through her life example. Finally, all women are seen as some kind of *ḍākinī* manifestation. (Simmer-Brown, 2012: 9)

The *ḍākinī* symbol transcends gender as in the ultimate realm; there is no duality of any kind, including gender. Especially since the *ḍākinī* symbolises the true nature mind, the mind of enlightenment, 'she' cannot be confined to the feminine gender, as she has been reduced to in conventional tantric Buddhism. Of the four categories of *ḍākinī*, the living woman has taken precedence over the remaining three as this is the most visible and comprehensible of all *ḍākinī* categories. The *ḍākinī* which is identified with the living woman has both its positive as well as negative aspects. On the positive side, women with high tantric realizations are regarded as manifestations of the *ḍākinī* (but almost never a *trulku*). However, identifying living women with the *ḍākinī* also has its problems. The point of contention of most feminist critique of the *ḍākinī* is what feminists see as an appropriation of the *ḍākinī* by monastic Buddhism in Tibet (Simmer-Brown, 2002). Feminists allege that women in Tibetan Buddhism have been exploited by male tantric practitioners to service these men's religious goal, acting as consorts to accelerate men's enlightenment.

Klein (1995) and Aziz (1987) draw a distinction between the seemingly egalitarian symbol of the *ḍākinī* and the lives of women in Tibet. Simmer-Brown (2002: 42) cites Herrmann-Pfandt as saying that "women in tantric texts were not depicted as autonomous beings who could use the *ḍākinī* imagery in service of their own liberation" (Simmer-Brown, 2012: 42). The sexual element of *tantra* has long been used by men to exploit

women and has resulted in the corruption of tantric Buddhist practice. Campbell (1996) pointed out that the common Tibetan notions of the *ḍākinī* as an epithet for a sexual partner has created space for sexual exploitation of women. Campbell adds that the sexual connotation of the *ḍākinī* is damaging for women because women have been reduced to being mere consorts of high *lamas*, and not tantric practitioners in their own right, thereby losing their personal subjectivity. I will discuss the effects of the *ḍākinī* symbolism in greater detail in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

It is perhaps too simplistic to correlate the sexual element in tantric Buddhism and the numerous cases of sexual abuse of women in the Himalayas by male clergy. However, Gutschow (2004), Wikan (1996) and Campbell (1996) have revealed the fact that women in the Himalayas have become victims of sexual abuses/exploitation by male clergy, *gomchen* and *yogīs*. Even Buddhist nuns are not spared. Himalayan Buddhist nuns, though they appear as androgynous, are very much susceptible to the dangers of the female body. Incidences of sexual assault on nuns by monks, *gomchen* and laymen are not uncommon in the Himalayan region. Gutschow (2004) reported that during her fieldwork, at least one nun was raped and there were even clandestine affairs between monks and nuns. Bhutan also has its fair share of incidences of sexual abuse on nuns. Wikan (1996) narrated the story of a 76-year old ex-nun who was a nun until the age of 19 when she was raped by a monk and left pregnant. The ex-nun's story shows how nuns suffer tremendously after being raped, having to disrobe because the vows of celibacy have been broken (even though sexual intercourse was unintentional on the part of the nun). The ex-nun was raped again later in life and left with a son. Her whole life fell apart since leaving the nunnery and since then, she has hardly had the opportunity for spiritual practice, something which she desired so much. She attributes her fate to her past evil deeds and like many Bhutanese women, prays on a daily basis to be reborn as a man. Wikan (1996) also noted that the lower the position of a woman in Bhutanese society, the

more vulnerable she is to sexual assault. This story shows that a nun is not immune to sexual abuse, especially by those who are supposed to observe lifelong vows of celibacy.

Wikan (1996) also highlighted the double standards surrounding men and women in religious practice in Bhutan. Runaway monks who disrobe, who are unable to fulfil their religious duties have a better chance of survival outside of the monastery than a nun who has left the nunnery although their level of religious training is the same. Because of social stigma of disrobing, nuns are unable to use their religious training to make a living after being expelled from the nunnery. Moreover, because laypeople prefer men, women like the ex-nun are unable to survive economically and continue to be entrenched in suffering all their lives.

4.3.5 Androcentric biographies and hagiographies

From the preceding sections, it is evident that the role of nuns in the Himalayan region is gendered. Nuns are limited to doing basic prayers and helping in laborious tasks. Their role in society is defined and limited by their gender. We have seen how Himalayan nuns are entrenched in gendered roles because of lack of access to full ordination and monastic education as well as prevailing gender biasness as a legacy from cultural conditioning. Here, I wish to demonstrate that gendered roles can also be attributed to biographies of religious masters or life stories of past nuns who have set the norm for nuns to adhere to. Schaeffer, quoting the Life of Metok Saldron, King Drakpa Taye who explains the place of women in religion to his daughter as she seeks his leave to become a nun:

In general, the appropriate religious duties of women are: protecting one's people as if [they] were sons, offering prayers to the three jewels, giving alms to beggars, [and] thinking compassionately toward all beings." "You will do as is customary, without thinking otherwise," the king commands Metok Saldron as she weeps in yearning for the Dharma. Even if women enter the monastic life, their activities may be limited. The unfaithful nun will be reborn in hell for her transgressions—a fate that presumably applies to monks as well, though Nyangral sees fit to make this explicit only in the case of nuns. (Schaeffer, 2004: 94)

There are also stories of nuns being constantly chided for wanting religious instructions and frequently reminded of their spiritual ‘inferiority’. Schaeffer (2004: 102) highlights how Orgyan Chokyi’s male guru deprecated her during her initial training in meditative concentration:

“Your woman’s mind does not understand great philosophy,” Orgyan Tenzin tells her. “You are like an old woman who needs a lesson on how to get started!” Orgyan Chokyi recoils at this, and thinks to herself that her master is wrong. She is not an “old woman,” and the reason for this is that she has no “burning desire,” hallmark of women according to a number of Tibetan Lives, as we have seen. (Schaeffer, 2004: 102)

To put things in perspective, not all monks are misogynists. In fact, many have supported nuns and given them religious instructions and praised their wisdom and practice. Orgyan Chokyi’s elder contemporary Tenzin Repa was one master who was generally very supportive of nuns and taught many women (Schaeffer, 2004). Moreover, Tenzin Repa also included the sayings of his female disciples in his anthology of songs. Some of these songs give us a glimpse of the way these sixteenth century Tibetan women viewed their bodies and their lives as females as well as their constraints in pursuing the spiritual path:

“When we hear the teachings of a great spiritual adept,” the women of Drakmar said to him, “we are leaky chimneys; overpowered by the inability to do the right thing, we forget these arcane teachings, and so these days we have no certainty.”

“No matter what you do in this nun’s body, there is suffering. Our parents are old, and we are not able to leave for very long, and even if we could go into retreat for a short time, we don’t have anyone to remove obstacles and watch over us.” (Schaeffer, 2004: 37)

Another notable example of a male teacher supporting his female student is the story of Guru Padmasambhava and Princess Trompa Gyen. Trompa Gyen narrated to her guru about her life difficulties to which the Guru gave a strongly-worded encouragement to value her own self and strive on in spiritual practice. He advised her thus:

...having forsaken your own priorities, you serve another, moving from parents and siblings to husband and in-laws, slaving in the home of strangers, suffering but getting no gratitude. He concluded with the admonition, "A girl should value her own worth. Stand up for yourself, Trompa Gyen!" And he urged her to renounce these patterns and to practice the dharma. (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 34)

Although there have been many male masters or monks who have been supportive of women's practice, these were the exception rather than the norm in the Himalayan region. Nuns are generally not considered as worthy subjects of discussion in spiritual texts, which is probably the reason, Buddhist texts and religious biographies appear androcentric. According to Schaeffer (2004), of the two-thousand known biographies of Tibetan Buddhist masters, about one hundred and fifty are autobiographies and of that, less than five are by women. With a deep desire to write her own life story, Orgyan Chokyi, pleaded with her male guru to assist her in penning her autobiography since she was illiterate and this was his response: "There is no reason to write a liberation tale for you—a woman," Orgyan Tenzin condemns Orgyan Chokyi. "You must be silent!" (Schaeffer, 2004: 98).

Simmer-Brown (2002) asserts that because women's suffering is greater than men's suffering, it motivates women to practice the dharma. Although suffering is definitely a catalyst for spiritual growth for both men and women, it does not necessarily mean that heaps of suffering needs to be thrust on women before women are encouraged to practice the dharma. Men who have not suffered much have also been able to gain marvellous realizations in the comforts of adequate sustenance, ample religious instruction and monastic education. Simmer-Brown (2002) also added that even if oppressions caused by patriarchy are reversed, it would merely yield different kinds of suffering. I disagree with such assertion not only because it is presumptuous that women are bound to suffer, whether there be patriarchy or not, but also counter-productive to efforts made by countless individuals and organisations who do great work in helping to uplift the status of Himalayan women. I believe that although suffering can be a motivational factor, suffering such as deprivation of education, requisites and religious instructions more often than not inhibits women's inherent spiritual potential. Instead of motivating women as Simmer-Brown (2002) asserts, immense suffering can actually cause many women to

drop out of the spiritual path or disrobe (cease to be nuns) because they are unable to sustain themselves or are physically or mentally abused by monks. I have seen this happening countless times throughout my monastic career since 1993, in India, Mongolia and the west and even in my study area.

4.4 Why did Women become Buddhist Nuns?

When institutionalised Buddhism of today is so gendered in the Himalayas and elsewhere, why then do women want to become nuns in the first place? Why did I become a nun? In order to understand why women still want to be a part of institutionalised Buddhism today, it is imperative to study the reasons why women joined the monastic order (Skt: *saṃgha*) in ancient India during the time of the Buddha. Why was institutionalised Buddhism, i.e. the monastic community so important to these early Buddhist women?

Most past research which have been done on this subject are based on sociology and psychology of religion, e.g. on 'relative deprivation' of women in ancient India which 'forced' them to flee their households and join the *saṃgha* (Eysenck, 1972: 138) quoted in (Sharma, 1977: 239). Sharma (1977) discussed about the motivation of ancient Indian women who chose to become Buddhist nuns, explaining two possible reasons (a) the "carrot of Buddhism" (e.g. people are drawn due to their encounter and insight with the Three Jewels of Buddhism; Buddha, Dhamma and *Samgha*) and (b) the "stick of circumstances" (e.g. the drudgery of domestic life and tragedy that they were left to get away for something) respectively. Basing his work primarily on two Buddhist texts: *Therīgāthā* and *Paramatthadīpanī*, the attraction to Buddhism (through the Three Jewels of Buddhism), individual aptitudes (disposition towards monastic life) and influence from their family and friends were identified as reasons for women renouncing the household life.

Sharma further analysed that women were primarily attracted to Buddhism. In certain situations upon hearing Buddha's teaching, women requested for immediate ordination, e.g. Mattakālī: who upon hearing the *Great Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, entered the order of the nuns (Sharma, 1977). Secondary reasons for joining the monastic order was due to their experience and the influence of family and friends like domestic tragedy, rejection from the world and marriages by society and husbands, household drudgery and to get away from poverty. Most women were drawn to the *saṃgha* because they wanted to become *bhikṣuṇī* (fully-ordained nun) on their own without anyone's influence. Sharma (1977: 249) highlighted the following fact that fifty out of seventy cases of women who joined the *saṃgha* to become fully ordained nuns—*bhikṣuṇīs* during the time of the Buddha, did so directly, without first becoming lay devotees. Eleven women attained one of the four stages of sainthood in Buddhism prior to joining the *saṃgha* (two of which attained full sainthood, i.e. *arhatship*).

Horner (1990) stated that it was regarded as perfectly respectable for women to enter the homeless life at the beginning of the order of the *bhikṣuṇī*. It was only later that the nuns' order "lost that character and became a refuge for the poor, the unsuccessful, the unmarried and the widowed, and the entrants were looked upon as unfortunates who had found life too difficult on account of the fruits of deeds done formerly" (quoted from Falk, 2010 who cited Horner (1990: 172)).

Horner's assertion is not necessarily applicable for all women, though. Contemporary ethnographic writings such as (Gutschow, 2004) on Himalayan Buddhist nuns in Zangskar, India report that most Himalayan nuns join the nunneries at a young age, "long before they come of marriageable age". According to Gutschow (2004: 11), "The popular assumption that nuns are women unable to find or keep a husband hardly reflects the current generation of nuns across the Himalayas." During her fieldwork, Gutschow noted that only one nun was a widow and not a single one was divorced or a single mother.

Despite the hardship they face as female monastics, the Zangskari nuns still endure and practice the dharma very sincerely and earnestly. Gutschow lamented that Buddhist nuns in Zangskar are “discounted as lesser monastics” and still assumed to “have less valid motivations than monks do”, in terms of joining the *samgha* but argues that the nuns’ motivation either “matches or exceeds that of monks”.

Nonetheless, the motivation to become nuns, as observed by Gutschow (2004) is not always altruistic. Gutschow’s ethnographic study corresponds with Sharma’s assertion of family influence, which is a strong factor in women becoming nuns in Zangskar. Family circumstances, especially poverty and hardship are some influencing factors for young girls to join the nunneries, which correspond to Horner’s assertion. Others join the nunnery as a welcome escape from dysfunctional families. Some willingly join the nunnery whereas others are forced by their parents or relatives to become nuns (Gutschow, 2004).

Women in the Himalayas also join the nunnery to escape from male domination in lay society, especially gendered roles in the household. Many women become nuns to avoid marriage and motherhood which cannot guarantee happiness. Gutschow (2004: 213) quotes a Zangskari nun on this matter,

...motherhood always involves suffering. First there is pregnancy, then miscarriage, or childbirth. The child may be stillborn or it may die soon after birth. Even if it lives, it causes its mother pain by abandoning her.

Hence, it may come as no surprise that nuns would appear happier and freer than laywomen. In fact, one nun in Zangskar recalled that as a child she saw nuns as happy and harmonious, and since then, she aspired to become a nun (Gutschow, 2004). Thus, it is evident that women and even young girls equate the life of a laywoman with suffering and the life of a nun as one which is free from suffering, at least from gendered roles in the household.

The community of nuns is an important pillar of support for a woman, especially one who has no means of sustenance or education to successfully remain in the laylife. If a woman were to live alone outside of the household, she would be subject to poverty and danger, especially vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse. Therefore, women willingly join nunneries for the company of other nuns and more importantly, for security. Nuns are admired by laywomen who wish that they could live in the company of a wholly female community, “far from the prying, onerous eyes of men” (Gutschow, 2004: 142).

In agrarian families in the Himalayan region, sending one’s daughter to the nunnery is an important economic investment as parents still benefit from their daughters’ labour. During the harvesting season or in times of shortage of labour, nuns are recalled to their natal homes to help out at the family farm (Gutschow, 2004). Some never even leave their family homes and practice as nuns in the household. The problem of shortage of labour in the villages is in part caused by migration of young men to urban areas. Thus, making a daughter into a nun ensures that a daughter labours in the fields and fills the gap left by men who migrated and women who are married off (Gutschow, 2004).

Women in the Himalayan region have the option of becoming nuns as the lineage of nuns, at least novice nuns (Skt: *śramaṇerikā*, Tib: *getsulma*), who hold thirty-six precepts is still alive in the region although there is no option for full ordination (Skt: *bhikṣuṇī*, Tib: *gelongma*). In this sense, although full ordination is not forthcoming, Himalayan women are far more fortunate than their Thai sisters as Thai society is “ambivalent about women who abandon traditionally accepted social roles, and they do not encourage women to renounce the world” (Falk, 2010: 37). Thai women are expected to live up to the ideal of a good wife and nurturing mother. Hence, the institution of ten-precept white-robed nuns, the *mae chiis* violate cultural norms of gender by abandoning their home lives and renouncing the world (Falk, 2010: 37). Another pertinent reason why young girls are sent to the nunneries by their parents is to secure some education. Although monastic

education was not available to nuns in the past, young nuns could at least learn how to read and write in order to recite prayers. Since the late twentieth-century, women of the Himalayas have more gates open to them to secure monastic education and this has also attracted many young girls to become nuns, myself included. One may argue that one need not ordain to get education in present times, especially with increased access to modern education in the Himalayan region, even in my country, Bhutan, but religious education is still only offered within the confines of the monastic wall, with very few exceptions such as the Central Tibetan University for Higher Buddhist Studies, in Sarnath, India which is open to laymen, laywomen, monks and nuns.

As laywomen are becoming more educated with many joining the workforce and becoming financially independent, there is a new trend emerging among Buddhist women, even in the Himalayas as educated young women such as women in the Newar community of Nepal "may experience less pleasure to marry than young women did in the past" (Levine, 1998: 1). Levine stresses that some Newari women remain single by choice and not because they were dejected or failed to attract marriage proposals.

Another important reason for ordination is due to "the desire to make meditation the central focus of one's life" (Levine 1998: 2). Levine (1998) asserts that such strong motivation is especially more likely to keep women in the nunhood more firmly. Nowadays, laywomen in the Himalayas learn meditation and due to positive experiences during meditation, these women decide to become nuns.

Sharma concluded that the reasons for ancient Indian women during the time of the Buddha to seek ordination as nuns was not only because these women had difficult lives and were compelled to join the *samgha* as a last resort, but even more so because they were inspired to become nuns and did so willingly. Therefore, 'relative deprivation' was not the sole determining factor for women joining the *samgha* but due to the appeal of

Buddhism through their encounter with the Buddha, Dharma and *Samgha*. From Sharma's findings, we can infer that women becoming nuns is neither a sign of weaknesses nor escapism but a means to find a conducive environment for their spiritual practice in pursuit of enlightenment. Ironically, the motivations for men joining the *samgha* are hardly questioned, if at all.

4.5 Summary

This chapter, the last of the literature review chapters was essentially a journey into the lives of the Buddhist women of the Himalayas, exploring the reasons for their low status in the society in general as well as the religious realm. The difficulties faced by Himalayan women, which includes Bhutanese women were highlighted, citing misogynistic and androcentric elements from biographies and hagiographies of Himalayan women practitioners as well as ethnographic work from Zanskar and Spiti Valley in India. The chapter provided a lucid backdrop to the actual scenario to be discussed in the ensuing results and discussion chapters whereby similar challenges were faced by the Bhutanese nuns in my study area.

CHAPTER 5: A TALE OF TWO NUNNERIES

5.1 Setting Out to the Field

9a.m. 15 August 2012-Punakha, Bhutan: I alighted from the taxi at Kuruthang taxi stand and looked around to see if my friend, Namgay Lhamo⁶³ had come to fetch me as agreed when I arranged for fieldwork at Jachung Karmo Nunnery. She was nowhere to be seen. I requested the taxi driver to keep my things in his taxi for a little while as I tried to contact her but in vain. I began to worry as I did not know the way to the nunnery. Moreover, the nunnery is very remote and I would have to walk through the forest. I was alone and had many things to carry. The nunnery is about eight hours' hike uphill from the nearest access road near Punakha, the district capital though there is a feeder road until Sisi Gang which is a solid two hours' walk to the nunnery. I overheard people in the marketplace saying that vehicles would not be able to pass through as the feeder road to the base of the nunnery had been washed off by the recent rains and landslide.

At that moment I thought my friend had deceived me or that she encountered problems with her teacher and the community of nuns about my visit. Perhaps she did not want to tell me the truth; hence, was avoiding me. All sorts of thoughts cropped up in my mind. I called my mother and sister in Thimphu, the capital city to inform them of my dilemma and they promptly advised me to go home. I thought I would wait and see and at the same time kept on trying to call my friends but to no avail. At about noon, I was still in the town area, pacing back and forth, frantically looking for my friend as she was supposed to be in town buying things for the nunnery. I passed by several rows of shops housing grocery stores, toy stores, restaurants and a bank. I looked in the direction of individual stalls selling cheese hung in strings. Some of the traders from Laya, the northernmost

⁶³ Pseudonym used to protect her true identity

region of Bhutan were wearing traditional triangle-shaped hats and dressed in black attire with white strips. Cheese is a must in every Bhutanese dish and people chew dried cheese which is akin to a piece of rock in their mouths—a typical Bhutanese habitual tendency. Looking at all those dangling cheese stirred up hunger pangs but I was in no mood to eat as I was worried sick about my onward journey to the nunnery.

I was getting more and more worried by the minute because I knew that the journey would be a long one and it was imperative that we reach the nunnery before dark. Suddenly from the side of my eye sight I caught sight of a few people in maroon-coloured attire and thought for a brief moment that it was Namgay Lhamo and her companions but they turned out to be a group of monks. It is not so easy to distinguish between monks and nuns due to our androgynous outlook as both have shaved heads and don similar robes. These adult monks couldn't possibly be from the nearby Zangtok Pelri temple which now has a monastic wing housing 20 monks, mostly children and teenagers. They looked more like monks from the Punakha *dzong* or from other parts of Bhutan, transiting in Kuruthang to go to Talo, Gasa and Laya or visiting the *dzong*.

I was disheartened but not long after I saw another person in maroon robes. I walked towards her and sure enough it was Namgay Lhamo after all. I was more relieved than happy to see her. We exchanged salutations in Dzongkha, the spoken language of this district, which is also the national language of Bhutan. I then asked if she was ready to go. She said she had a few more tasks to finish. Then at 1 pm we left the town to go to the nunnery with Tshering Yuden, another nun friend of hers. Namgay Lhamo who studied with me at Jamyang Choling Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, India but later dropped-out, was now the secretary (Dzongkha: *drungyig*) of Jachung Karmo Nunnery and her friend, Tshering Yuden, was the steward (Dzongkha: *nyerpa*). They were in town to shop and collect donations from sponsors for the *Nyungne* fasting practice scheduled to start the next day.

We hired a pick-up truck and went towards the nunnery from Khuruthang town. We passed the main administrative and religious centre of Punakha, the Punakha Dzong which was built majestically in between the Mo Chu and Po Chu rivers and the main Punakha town. There I saw many monks clad in maroon robes wandering here and there and many civil servants coming out of the *dzong* as it was their lunch break.

The population of Punakha is less than 20,000 people. The people of this region, called Ngalongpas follow the state religion, Drukpa Kagyu and celebrate festivals like *dromchoe* for five days with masked dance and *pazap cham*⁶⁴. They also celebrate *Nyinglok* (the reversing of the day) as their New Year together with the celebration of proper *Losar* (New Year) in the first month of the lunar calendar. The Western Bhutanese also celebrate the rice planting in early summer and harvest in autumn.

Further up from the *dzong*, there were people and animals every now and then at the roadside walking and some were waving their hands asking for a lift. The village houses we passed are built from pounded mud and wood with stone foundations. Traditional houses are usually large, three to four-storeys. The ground floor is used for cattle, the first floor as the storeroom to store the grains and second floor for the family members to live. The topmost part is reserved for the family altar or shrine (Dzongkha: *choesham*) where they do their prayers and offerings. It also doubles as a living quarters for guest monks or nuns. The houses are clustered in tiny groups of twenty to thirty units forming a village. Nowadays, most houses are two-storeyed high surrounded by fruit and vegetable gardens and rice fields. Rice, both white and red is grown as the main crop as there is abundant water from two main rivers which run through the district. Rice, grown twice a year, is the staple crop though other grains such as wheat, barley and millet are grown. In the not so distant past, most farmers used bullocks to plough the fields although now some have begun using power-tillers. Nonetheless, most farmers still use bullocks.

⁶⁴ A religious dance performed by local militia men, dressed in battle gear showcase a battle

After the town area we had to divert to the feeder road which was in appalling condition. There were pot holes everywhere. The road was slippery, and every once in a while, we had to wade through streams to cross the road. The people sitting in the open-air at the back of the pick-up were screaming as they were occasionally thrown up and down and if they did not hold properly they could even be thrown out of the vehicle. Because we are nuns, my two friends and I were given priority seating inside the car with the driver and another man who owns a village temple called Guma Goenpa halfway to the nunnery. After about five kilometres which took us slightly more than an hour, the pick-up couldn't go further. Reaching that point was an achievement by itself. Once every few minutes the passengers had to come down from the car to either push it uphill or pull it downwards. At one point, the vehicle got stuck in the mud and in the stream which was also a sharp bend. The driver tried to speed up to get out of the mud but the car skidded and we almost fell into the ravine. One side of the pick-up's wheel was dangling down but the driver managed to stop the vehicle in time. He asked all of us to get down and got the men in the car to pull and push to bring it back to the road. Shortly after that the driver refused to go further as he was worried about our safety and his vehicle as well.

Stranded in the middle of nowhere and left without a choice, we alighted from the vehicle, unloaded the goods belonging to the nunnery and thought about what to do next. The other passengers walked on with their things on their backs but the owner of Guma Goenpa stayed back with us to help. The weather was very foggy and cloudy that it might rain anytime. We tried to arrange for a horse from Chogyal and his wife Pema Yangden as he is the only one around the nunnery who has three horses to transport our things but he said the horses were already running errands in someone else's house along with his son and would not be available for the next three days. We will get our things delivered after three days if this arrangement was acceptable to us. My nun friends thought for a while and called the teacher and the other nuns in the nunnery to come and help. The

teacher and a group of nuns were all well aware that the groceries for the next twenty days for the *Nyungne* prayers were to be delivered on that day and were already trekking halfway down the mountain to meet us.

After making the necessary arrangements, Namgay Lhamo and I went ahead because she wanted to personally escort me as she knew that I would not be able to walk with the rest of the nuns who are very experienced trekkers and walked very fast. The steward or *nyerpa*, Tshering Yuden and Chogyal stayed back at the spot to take care of our things while waiting for the nuns and teacher to come down. I also left my things, except for my electronic gadgets which I carried myself as I was worried they might manhandle the items while transporting it by horses. After an hour's hike uphill Namgay Lhamo saw two big bulls on our way and thus, ran down and asked me to follow her, signalling to me that I should not make any noise. I was surprised and asked her why we were running as I neither heard nor saw anything. Nonetheless, I silently followed her instructions. After walking a little distance away she climbed up a tree, located offtrek of the small forest path full of trees and ferns. Since I was inexperienced, I couldn't climb the tree. I told her that I was fine at the bottom of the tree and asked her again to tell me what she was up to. She said one of the bulls would chase us if he sees us because it likes to 'bulldoze' people. She told me of two incidences when it attacked some local people and left them badly injured. The bull also injured horses grazing in the forest. Hence, we waited and hoped that these bulls would come down and take the path that we came from so that we could proceed but it was never coming. So we came down back to the path and walked towards the bulls as that was the only path we had. To our surprise we heard some human voices and the ringing of the bull's bell hanging on its neck. In the meantime we went and hid ourselves behind an old ruined wall. We saw that someone was chasing the bulls further from the path and down into the forest that even if they wanted to come and chase us we would be able to escape since we were now on higher ground. It is believed that animals

cannot run uphill as fast as they can downhill. We came out of our hiding place and started walking. About 200 meters later, we heard some female voices. Shortly after that we met three nuns who came to receive me with tea, biscuits, *zaw*⁶⁵ and *seep*⁶⁶. I was deeply touched by their kind gesture and very grateful too because we were walking for so long and really longed for hot tea. We all greeted each other saying Kuzu Zangpo, introduced ourselves and then sat for milk tea. The tea was meant only for Namgay Lhamo and I but we insisted that they join us since they too had been walking down from the nunnery which is not only a difficult trek but a long one too. So we all drank together and talked about the nuns and nunneries⁶⁷, teacher problems, nun-teacher problems and many other issues. Most of them were quite open and felt very comfortable to discuss their problems and other issues with me but one of them was very shy to speak much to me. Kunga was the youngest in the group and received secular education until Class 8. After tea, we resumed trekking and this time the nuns helped carry both our bags. Though I had no load to carry, the entire hike was literally an ‘uphill battle’ and I was extremely exhausted. Worse still, the air was very thin due to the high altitude coupled with the scarcity of air due to the denseness of the trees and the bushes. Sometime later, we were met by their young monk teacher and a few nuns teasing a snake that they saw on the road. They were repairing the road to the nunnery. The job was supposed to be carried out by labourers and bulldozers but they were nowhere in sight. After a short greeting and introduction, we all continued our journey and the monk teacher and two nuns went downhill to check on the workers. Then as we went further up we met a big group of seventeen young nuns waiting at the side of the path. After exchanging greetings, we asked what they were doing and they replied that they were asked by their teacher to wait first and not to collect the things bought by the *nyerpa* and *drungyig* as they might get horses to carry the things. It

⁶⁵ roasted rice

⁶⁶ roasted flattened corn

⁶⁷ the nuns are from two different nunneries, i.e. Jachung Karmo and Wolakha nunneries

was by then almost dark and we asked them to come back to the nunnery with us because if they were to go to the place where we left our things they would not be able to return until morning. Besides, it is not safe to walk in the dark in the forest due to the steep terrain and wild animals. Afraid of disobeying their teacher, they were a little hesitant to take up our suggestion. Namgay Lhamo then called the teacher on her mobile which surprisingly had access to the local network and suggested the same to him to which he immediately agreed. We also called the *nyerpa* and asked her to carry the things until Guma Goenpa so that we could come and pick it up on another day.

As we all headed back to the nunnery, a dog from the village followed us all the way up. It was a big black dog called Naku. It seemed to know each and every nun well and led our path. It was 7 pm and the sun was setting. I was told that we still had a good few hours before reaching the nunnery. The path was becoming steeper and narrower, marshier and more difficult to walk. It was full of mud with barely any space to step on. Moreover, it was pitch dark and since it was my first trip and I was not familiar with the road, I struggled with each step. Needless to say, the nuns had no problem as they tread along this path almost every other day. It would not be an exaggeration to say that they could walk the path even with their eyes closed. It seemed to me that they had memorised each and every step. Some nuns were carrying a mobile with a flashlight to help me find my way. I too had a very small flashlight which was actually my key chain and that saved me. I had to walk very slowly so that I did not fall into the mud and off the cliff. In some areas the path was so narrow, not enough for even one person to pass through. We chanted mantras as we walked in the dark. Some of the nuns were cracking jokes. Suddenly, we heard a very frightening sound and an animal ran down from the forest above towards us. The nuns walking in front turned and ran down screaming “*Dom, Dom* (Bear, Bear)”. I was the second last in line with Namgay Lhamo in front of me and the friend who came to receive us with tea was in front of her. As the nuns screamed and came running

downhill, the nun in front of Namgay Lhamo also turned back and tried to run but she bumped into Namgay Lhamo and they both fell one on top of the other. Fortunately, they did not roll down the hill as it was the point where we were negotiating a very steep slope. I was breathless and could neither move nor scream. I was motionless for a minute. Then a roar of laughter broke the silence of the dark moonless night. One nun declared that it was not a bear, but the black dog Naku. We all sat down for a while to rest and regain our composure. At the same time the older nuns like Namgay Lhamo told the young nuns not to laugh aloud which is taboo, especially for women. She also told them not to mention the name of the animal (Bear) as it may just appear. If they really want to refer to the animal, they could replace it by some other name but not its real name.

We walked and walked but never seemed to reach the nunnery. After a long and tiring uphill trek we arrived at what looked like a flat terrain and finally saw a glimmer of light at a distance. When the nuns told me that the light was from the nunnery, I was elated and relieved that we finally arrived. We rested for a few minutes at that spot which the nuns said was the final resting place of their late abbess, the highly accomplished nun Lopenma Paldon. The spot marks a stupa (Tib: *horten*) dedicated to the late abbess which contains her ashes and relics.

We then proceeded to the nunnery—alternating between downhill and uphill treks. By the time we reached Namgay Lhamo's room it was already 10.45 pm. Almost all the nuns came to welcome us and sat around me for a while, wanting to chat. Shortly afterwards, Namgay Lhamo asked them to leave as it was way past bedtime and that we should have a meal before going to bed. She also told them that we all needed to wake up very early since the *Nyungne*⁶⁸ fasting retreat commences the next morning. Once the junior nuns went back to their respective rooms we had tea followed by dinner and then straight to bed. I could not sleep well as I was drained out from the trip and I had nothing except my

⁶⁸ The fasting practice of Nyungne is a very well-known, popular, and profound purification practice that is performed in all Himalayan countries where Vajrayana Buddhism flourished. It is mostly practiced by women.

electronic equipment with me. I did not even have my toiletry since I left my bag behind to be brought by the horse. I only had the robes I was wearing and my laptop, camera, recorder, mobile phone, a notebook and a few pens. My friends were very tired that they went to sleep the moment their heads touched their pillows.

5.2 In the Shadows of the White Eagle—Jachung Karmo Nunnery

Going back a little in history, Jachung Karmo (White mythical eagle) is also known as Thuje Drak⁶⁹. The nunnery was founded by a monk called Sewla Choje Lama Ngawang Pekar. The nunnery has been in existence for almost 300 years. He was the brother of the first Jamgon Trulku Ngawang Gyeltshen⁷⁰ who founded the Dorjiden monastery of Sewla in Punakha. Both brothers were the main students of His Holiness the 2nd Je Khenpo⁷¹ Sonam Yozer (1623-1698). Lama Ngawang Pekar appointed his sister Rinchen Zangmo, a nun, as the first Lopenma or the abbess of the nunnery. During her time, the nunnery flourished and is believed to have had over a hundred nuns. Their main practice was the *Nyungne* fasting practice. Amazingly, these medieval nuns had the opportunity to engage in very advanced spiritual practices such as *Mahāmudrā*, the *Six Yogas of Naropa* (Tib: *Naro Choedrug*), *Choepa ro-nyom*, *Drebu Tendrel Rabdun*, etc. which is not even available to present-day nuns. Nun Rinchen Zangmo was a highly realized practitioner and is said to have achieved a special *siddhi*⁷² which enabled her to fly. During her last breath, she was believed to have used her spiritual powers and flew to Sha Phuntsho Pelri in Wangdi Phodrang district, never to be seen again, an indication of realization of the spiritual path. Such was the spiritual ability of past women practitioners at Jachung Karmo.

⁶⁹ The cliff of 1000 Armed Avalokiteśvara

⁷⁰ Grandnephew of the 1st Desi Tenzin Drukgyal (Phuntsho, 2013)

⁷¹ Supreme Head of Religion in Bhutan

⁷² Skt: *siddhi*, refers to accomplishment, performance, fulfilment, complete attainment (of any object), success or attainment of supernatural powers

The first temple was built by Lama Ngawang Pekar who had a vision of the site in the form of a vulture's peak during his meditation. He consulted his master, Druptob or Siddhi Ngawang Samten and built a small temple at the present location. He was meditating there but it was very difficult for him to survive as there was no water in that area. So he prayed to his *yidam* (tutelary deity) Tseringma to grant him a water source, a wish which she promptly fulfilled. Now the drinking water in the nunnery is from this *drupchu* (sacred water) and it never dries be it summer or winter. The temple was small until another abbess Anim Lopenma Paldon came in 1950.

The current nunnery (see Figure 5.1, p.142), built from pounded mud with stone foundations is on a holy site and looks like as if it is floating in the clouds and mist encircled by mountains and lush green forests. The nunnery is surrounded by mountains in all directions. From the cliff, one can see the beautiful valley below with villages and the enormous Punakha Dzong standing majestically between the meeting point of the rivers Pho Chu and Mo Chu. A little further in the direction of the *dzong* are the valleys of Shegana, one of the places where the nuns go to collect grains from the donors. Also visible in the northern direction from the nunnery are places like Gasa, Gon Tsephu, Sewla, Kabisa and many small villages that are very far to reach as there are no proper access roads. Likewise in the southern direction, one can see the Talo and Nurbugang valleys which are a three-hour walk from the nunnery. Talo is the place where all the four Queens of the Fourth King of Bhutan were born and bred. It was also the main seat of Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the founding father of unified Bhutan.

In 1950, Jamyang Chöden, commonly known as Anim Paldon was appointed abbess or *lopenma* of Jachung Karmo nunnery at the age of 25. She received her practice training and guidance under several masters namely Siddhi Metok Palzang, under whom she completed two sets of three years retreat and after that she practiced the Six Yogas of Naropa under the guidance of Dho Chorten Lopen Karma Tshering and Lama Sonam

Zangpo, Lopen Namgyal and many other masters. The nunnery flourished under her as she renovated the temple and consecrated many statues and other necessary ritual items for the nuns. She also introduced the practice of *Nyungne* fasting retreat through which the nuns gained fame. During Anim Lopenma Paldon's time, there were three nunneries in Bhutan namely Jachung Karmo Nunnery in Punakha, Sha Phuntsho Pelri in Sha Gewog, Wangdi Phodrang district and Kila Dechen Yangtse nunnery in Paro. All these three nunneries were under the supervision of Lopenma Paldon. Since Jachung Karmo nunnery was the oldest, a nun from here used to go to Sha Phuntsho Pelri and Kila Goenpa Nunnery as a teacher to teach basic reading of the text and prayers. The Sha Phuntsho Pelri has since closed down.

The nunnery also received many acres of land from generous donors and sponsors in hopes of getting prayers and merits in return for their ancestors as well as for their good health, long and prosperous life. The donation of land has been extremely helpful for the long-term sustenance of the nuns and the nunnery. She held the post of Abbess for twenty-five years, after which in 1975, at the age of fifty years, she passed the responsibility to Lopenma Pekar Wangmo, sister of the Ex-Dorji Lopen of the Monastic Body who is still alive in Talo Norbugang, Punakha. Not long after the second Lopenma Pekar Wangmo's tenure as abbess, the nunnery degenerated and all the nuns dispersed leaving no one in the nunnery. The village community had to hire a paid person to stay in the nunnery and take care of it for sixteen years. Life for the caretaker was tough too as it is very remote and full of wild animals.

The nunnery was revived in the mid-1980s by His Majesty the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. Upon request by the Minister Japhag Dorji, the fourth king reappointed Anim Lopenma Paldon as the head of the nunnery in the summer of 1986, with thirty nuns. She administered the nuns and nunnery much better than before. She advised the nuns to concentrate on their practice of *Nyungne* for the benefit of the people

as well as themselves. Thus, with the cultivation from the lands donated by the sponsors in the name of their deceased ancestors and the support from the five villages (Pashikha, Kilikha, Talo, Nahay, Shegana) around Punakha and Wangdi Phodrang (see Figure 5.2, p.143), the nuns and nunnery grew strong and gained respect and trust from the surrounding society. The nunnery land was given to some farmers to cultivate for the nuns and in return, the harvest is shared equally between the nunnery and the farmers with some labour input (collecting of harvest) from the nuns themselves. To help the nuns in collecting the share of harvest, the nunnery had a *nyerpa* from Talo for almost fifteen years and recently Guma *gewog*⁷³ had taken over the responsibility to collect the share. After three years, the nuns decided to collect the share on their own and since then has been the nuns' responsibility to collect it. Being a Government-run nunnery, the nuns used to receive a stipend of Ngultrum (Nu.) 200 per month for their sustenance. After Anim Lopenma's demise, the nuns were left without a teacher or guidance for a long time. The nuns struggled to run the nunnery as they had no knowledge on nunnery management.

A few years later they found a teacher named Nyima from Sha who was kind enough to come and teach the rites and rituals but not Buddhist philosophy and their subjects pertaining to monastic studies. The teacher was appointed by the Je Khenpo and he taught the nuns for seven years after which he retired because of old age and poor health. Since the teacher left, a few young nuns came to seek shelter and the remaining senior nuns helped them with reading and chanting. In 1995, Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuk paid a visit and since then she has been taking care of the nunnery providing drinking water and sanitation. In March 2012, Jachung Karmo nunnery combined with Sangchen Dorji Lhundrup⁷⁴ nunnery in Wolakha, Punakha becoming their retreat wing. Jachung Karmo, at the time of my fieldwork was home to

⁷³ sub-district

⁷⁴ Founded by Yab Ugyen Dorji, father of the four Queen Mothers of Bhutan (wives of the fourth king)

twenty-five nuns ranging from the ages of nine to forty-three. Of these, seventeen were nuns from the Wolakha Nunnery and the remaining, senior nuns who have been with the nunnery for a duration of between two and twenty-six years. Since the merger of the two nunneries, a new teacher was appointed by the director of the Wolakha nunnery, a twenty-three year old monk from Chimi Lhaxhang in Punakha.



Figure 5.1: Jachung Karmo Nunnery, Punakha, Western Bhutan⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Source: Fieldwork (2012)



Figure 5.2: The forest and villages surrounding Jachung Karmo Nunnery⁷⁶

5.2.1 The *Nyungne* Fasting Practice—A Legacy of Bhikṣuṇī Lakṣmī

According to the senior-most nun, Tenzin Dema, the *Nyungne* practice at Jachung Karmo Nunnery was initiated by the late abbess Anim Lopenma Paldon or simply, Anim Lopen, thinking it best for the living, the deceased and also for the nuns who had to contribute something to the community rather than living off the laity's hard-earned labour. *Nyungne* is focused on the 1000-Armed Avalokitēśvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This particular manifestation of Avalokitēśvara (Tib. *Chenrezig*) has a thousand eyes to see the suffering of sentient beings and a thousand arms to act accordingly to liberate sentient beings through his⁷⁷ (or her) deep compassion. The nuns at Jachung Karmo practice *Nyungne* as their main practice which is to liberate the deceased and lead the living to higher rebirths and ultimately, to enlightenment itself.

The *Nyungne* practice originated from Bhikṣuṇī Lakṣmī (Tib. *Gelongma Palmo*), a princess from Uddiyana⁷⁸, West India who is believed to have lived during the tenth or

⁷⁶ Source: Fieldwork (2012)

⁷⁷ Avalokitēśvara is represented in male form in India and the Himalayan region but in its ultimate sense, the enlightened deity transcends gender and form.

⁷⁸ Present day-Swat Valley, Pakistan, the same region as the founding father of Buddhism in Tibet and Bhutan, Guru Padmasambhava. Some sources such as Wanghen (2009) say that she was an Afghani princess during the great Buddhist Afghanistan.

eleventh century. She was very beautiful but refused to marry and instead became a *bhikṣuṇī*, i.e. a fully-ordained Buddhist nun. Due to bad residual karma she was afflicted with leprosy caused by *nāga*⁷⁹ spirits. Her body's condition was so foul with blood and pus all over that she was expelled from the kingdom and forced to live alone in a wooden hut in the forest. Her hands also fell off and she was reduced to eating like an animal. Plagued with enormous suffering, she practiced *Nyungne*, fasting while supplicating Avalokitēśvara. Practicing with fervent faith and devotion day and night, her leprosy was completely cured and she merged with Avalokitēśvara and attained the tenth level of bodhisattva realization (Wangchen, 2009).

Nyungne involves eating only one meal on the first day and fasting completely on the second, and is often done in conjunction with taking the eight Mahāyāna precepts (Tib: *thegchen sojong*)⁸⁰. Vajrayāna Buddhists believe that it is such a powerful purification practice that doing only one set of *Nyungne* is sufficient to close the door to the lower realms (Wangchen, 2009). On the first day the practice begins at 3 a.m. and the first thing the nuns do is take Mahāyāna *sojong*/precepts. Then they recite the *monlam* (supplication) prayers composed by Gelongma Palmo together with visualisations and do extensive prostrations. The practice is divided into three sessions a day. On the first day, the nuns have only one meal with a cup of tea after the third session in the evening. Then, from the afternoon of the first day until the morning of the third day, the nuns do not eat or drink⁸¹ and observe noble silence. The same routine continues throughout the second sets and third sets and so on.

On the third day, the nuns wake up at the same time at 3 a.m. and after taking the Mahāyāna precepts, they chant for a while and are given blessed water from a vase (Tib:

⁷⁹ *nāgā*, m. (prob. neither fr. na-ga, nor fr. nagna,) a snake, (esp.) • a Nāga or serpent-demon (the race of Kadru or Su-rasā inhabiting the waters or the city Bhoga-vaṭī under the earth • they are supposed to have a human face with serpent-like lower extremities • their kings are Śeṣha, Vāsuki, and Takshaka • mṛā, or ī,)n. formed of snakes, relating to serpents or serpents-demons, snaky, serpentine, serpent-like. (Monier Williams, -)

⁸⁰ Mahāyāna restoring and purifying ordination

⁸¹ Some gurus do not even allow practitioners to swallow their own saliva

bumpa). The nuns recite mantra for purification and drink the water as a means of cleansing and to signify the breaking of fasting and noble silence. The nuns are then served boiled water followed by *tsampa*⁸² and tea and later, some rice porridge. The food during *Nyungne* must be pure vegetarian, free from any meat substances, eggs, onions and garlic. The nuns do not eat dinner on the third day also. Each set of *Nyungne* lasts two days. The nuns at Jachung Karmo continue the practice for seventeen days, performing up to eight sets of *Nyungne* continuously.

5.2.2 Jachung Karmo of Today—A Cliff-hanging Experience

It was the first day of the *Nyungne* fasting practice at Jachung Karmo and I was awake by 3 a.m. but I did not get out of bed as I thought of getting a little more rest after the arduous hike up the nunnery the previous day. I decided to skip the early morning session of the *Nyungne* fasting retreat which commenced at 4 a.m.

When I finally got out of bed at dawn (5 a.m) and went outdoors, the sun had not yet arisen. A senior nun explained that the weather in the nunnery is pleasantly cool in summer but terribly cold in winter though the temperature at Punakha town below is hot in summer and pleasantly cool in winter. As I began brushing my teeth and washing my face the sun revealed itself from behind the mountain. As it reflected on the snow-filled mountains interspaced with bare rocky mountain, I was astounded by the scenery (see Figure 5.3, p.146). It was a sight to behold—breathtakingly beautiful. I felt like I was in heaven, with the five-coloured⁸³ prayer flags fluttering across the nunnery complex sending out good wishes to all sentient beings. My mind became so still and tranquil as all my conceptual thoughts just vanished. The clouds below, the snow-white mountains, the rivers, valleys, mist rising up from the ground like smoke, the chirping of birds and water falling down the cliff below the water tap of the nunnery. In the background, the

⁸² roasted barley flour

⁸³ red, white, yellow, green and blue

mesmerizing and deeply soothing vibrations from the musical instruments played by the nuns in the temporary prayer hall added to the mood. I could appreciate why great masters of the past preferred to remain in solitary meditation in the mountains and established their monasteries and nunneries in these types of setting.



Figure 5.3: View of the mountains of Punakha from Jachung Karmo Nunnery



Figure 5.4: Nuns in their makeshift kitchen at Jachung Karmo Nunnery⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Source of Figures 5 and 6: Fieldwork (2012)

Breakfast at the nunnery was just a cup of tea, with occasional biscuit treats. The nuns had no dining room so they ate in their rooms or outdoors, wherever they felt comfortable. It was only after breakfast at 7 a.m. that I gathered enough strength to attend the retreat. Strangely, Namgay Lhamo and Tshering Yuden who were so used to trekking up and down the nunnery were bedridden for three days from sore feet and backache. I was really surprised as they should be more used to trekking than I but their bodies had become very weak.

As I walked out into the open air looking for the lavatory, I saw two nuns racing downhill in what looked like an emergency dash to the loo. I walked behind them for about seven minutes around the winding, narrow and terribly slippery path before I saw six nuns standing in queue in front of a dilapidated old stone-made lavatory, with a massively cracked wooden door filled with holes which would be a joy for any peeping-tom. Nuns with severe abdominal pains had little choice but to wait patiently while those with full bladders like I decided to go a little downhill into the open air to ease ourselves, as the wait was too much to bear. Fortunately, there is a water tap from the Tseringma *drubchu* for us.

That year's *Nyungne* retreat was being conducted at a temporary prayer hall which is actually two nuns' rooms converted into a prayer hall. The makeshift prayer hall now replaces the old main temple hall destroyed by an earthquake the year before which doubles as classrooms. Inside, there were numerous statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas, the tallest being two feet high. Unlike other temples in Bhutan, the nunnery did not have a central statue. There are a few *thangkas*⁸⁵ adorning the walls, covering up the cracks and worn-out paint. The most beautiful *thangka* that caught my eye was the six by three feet embroidery of Thousand Armed Avalokiteśvara as the central figure with Gelongma Palmo, the founder of the *Nyungne* practice and Lama Ngawang Pekar on his left and

⁸⁵ Painting of buddhas, bodhisattvas and realized masters of the past, sewed on cloth and hung in temples, monasteries and even in the prayer room in individual homes.

right side. Since it was a retreat, right in the front centre was a temporary altar housing numerous water bowls and bowls filled with the seven offerings of water for drinking, washing of the feet, flowers, incense, butter lamp, perfumed water, food and a conch representing offering of music. The altar was full to the brim with *tsog* offerings of packed food and beautifully decorated *tormas*.

Inside the makeshift prayer hall, one could feel that the structure was not entirely stable as it was on the ground floor of a building whose top floors had been destroyed by the earthquake. Fortunately, the nuns' rooms in a separate cottage-like building were not badly affected. Contrary to Zangmo's (2009) assertion that the nuns' slept in one room, I found that the nuns live two to a room in twelve rooms. The teacher had a separate single room for himself. However, he too used the same toilet as the nuns which proved rather awkward for him and the nuns.

It was almost lunchtime, and three nuns were busy cooking in the makeshift kitchen outside. The kitchen (see Figure 5.4, p.146) was shielded on the three sides by a four-foot zinc sheet while the ceiling was a corrugated zinc sheet, which is not totally water-proof. During heavy downpour, the nuns are unable to use the kitchen. That afternoon, I saw the nuns bathing in sweat while cooking because the zinc sheet trapped the heat and 'cooked' the nuns together with the food. There was no space for pots and pans, so the nuns kept their cooking utensils outside, right beside the cliff. When the wind blew, the entire rickety kitchen shook violently, and the nuns would make a dash for safety, lest the kitchen fell off the cliff. Fortunately the new kitchen was almost completed at the time of my fieldwork.

After the previous year's earthquake, the nuns scoured the area but the temple walls were nowhere to be seen, believed to have fallen off the cliff. The thought of being in parts of the old temple complex that still stood is frightening as it is built on a cliff at the hilltop with strong winds billowing almost every day. None of the temple rooms and

shrines could be used because it was in danger of collapsing at any minute. Yet the nuns used the last room which was relatively intact as their butter lamp offering room as that room contains the *chorten* of the late founder of the nunnery, the monk Lama Ngawang Pekar.

After lunch, I went to check inside and it was really chilling as I could feel the whole temple shaking. A peep out the remaining window immediately showed signs of landslide from the rock side and the cliff side below. We could hardly see the ground as it was very high up on the cliff but the young nuns ran up and down without a second thought for their safety. The nuns even climbed the roof of the temple to hang and dry their clothes. Never mind that the temple roof could cave-in at any moment. Zangmo (2009) aptly summarised the condition of the nunnery thus:

The Jachung Karmo Nunnery with its dilapidated buildings and infrastructure was [is] considered one of the most deprived nunneries in Bhutan. This nunnery lacks the most basic facilities any institution of this type needs to operate effectively. There are no separate classrooms for teaching or rooms for meditation, and sleeping. When one look[s] at the nunnery from a distance, the house[s] seem big and pretty good. But when you go to the actual spot you see that the three cottages they have, one is completely ruined. There are no proper windows; the floors are all rotten due to dampness and the walls are all mouldy. They use one small bedroom for virtually everything; sleeping, class lessons, meditation, dining, and meetings. It does not have electricity, sanitary facilities, dining hall, kitchen or library space. The environment is, by all standards, not conducive for learning. Winters are very cold and summers are very wet which makes it difficult to get to the nunnery. One has to walk through the strenuous leach infested paths. (Zangmo, 2009)

It was already 6 p.m. When the nuns stopped for a short break and resumed their prayers I joined them. The chanting was very melodious with all the musical instruments⁸⁶ and hand gestures (Skt: *mudrā*)⁸⁷. Dekyi, the *umze*⁸⁸'s voice was very soft and soothing that I felt elevated to a higher plane of existence. The tune and style of chanting in Bhutan are different from the ones that I have heard in India within the Tibetan community though the words are similar because of similarities in the prayer texts. Even the hand gestures

⁸⁶ consisting of *dung* (horn), *gyaling* (high-pitched trumpet like instrument), *rolmo* (cymbals), *nga* (drum), *drilbu* (bell), *dadu* (small hand drum or *damaru* in Sanskrit) and *dorje* (scepter or *vajra* in Sanskrit)

⁸⁷ N. (Sanskrit) of partic. positions or intertwining's of the fingers (24 in number, commonly practised in religious worship, and supposed to possess an occult meaning and magical efficacy.

⁸⁸ chanting master

or *mudrās* and the way the musical instruments are played in Bhutan are also very different.

Apart from the nuns, there were a few laymen participating in the *Nyungne* fasting retreat from the nearby village and they seemed to enjoy the prayers as much as I did. One of them, Singye Dorje, 49, from Tsendegang in Guma Gewog, Punakha seemed to be very familiar with the practice as well as the hand *mudrās*, chanting and musical instruments. I asked him about it later during the break and he said that he was a monk before in the Punakha Dzong. Singye Dorje still practices Buddhism but not as intensively as he used to when he was a monk because since disrobing, he has to take care of his wife and children and other family members. He has to work in the field and earn a living to support his family. For that purpose he said that he helps the village people by reading the Sutras⁸⁹ (Tib: *mdo*) and performing *pūjās* wherever it is needed or whenever he is invited. In return, he receives offerings in the form of cash or grains and vegetables. His religious role in society is similar to that of a *gomchen* but since the concept of *gomchen* is not applicable to Western Bhutan, he does not use that title as such. Anyhow, monks who have disrobed are referred to as *gelong getre*⁹⁰ literally meaning a “monk who has disrobed” which is a somewhat derogatory term. Anyhow, there is no equivalent term to refer to a disrobed nun in any of the Bhutanese or even Tibetan languages.

Singye Dorje was not too pleased to see that the young nuns were not practicing the retreat well and he said that it would be good if the nuns could help the laypeople in between the sessions with short explanations on the purpose of practicing *Nyungne*, visualization of the deities and the importance of dedicating merits to all sentient beings. The laypeople truly lack such knowledge and it would be good if the nuns take up the role as teachers to explain the prayers. He expressed his desire to see nuns do even more

⁸⁹ discourses attributed to the historical Buddha and his chief-disciples

⁹⁰ *dralog* in Tibetan, meaning “reversed from monk to a layman”

for society, especially in teaching dharma to the laypeople and performing more rituals for the communities. He added,

I suggest that when the people come to the nunnery or when the nuns go out to peoples' houses to perform rituals, nuns should teach the basic do's and don'ts in daily life and simple visualizations during the *Nyungne* retreats. Village people do not know anything, so it will help a lot. Nuns should know how to perform *Nyungne*, read texts and recite prayers during deaths. If possible they need to know how to perform *kangsha*⁹¹, *choku*⁹², *dechen shingdrup*⁹³ as most people need explanation.

Coming from a layman and an ex-monk, it shows that attitudes towards women's ability to perform ritual practices are changing in Bhutan. These changing attitudes are also linked to the dire situation of the local communities, especially the poor who are turning to the nuns because they are unable to get *samgha* for *pūjās*. Singye Dorji lamented,

We cannot get dharma as we are simple and poor people because the *samghas* nowadays expect very lavish offerings and donations. Likewise, the *samgha* also target those 'big shots' and when the poor people request they say... oh! today we are booked for such and such a minister's house etc. There are many *geshes*⁹⁴ in Thimphu and they form their own group and perform *shabten* (prayers) for people with high expectations. So, many poor people do not perform anything but go to temples on full moon and new moon days to at least keep their ties with the dharma. Many convert to Christianity for this reason.

Singye opined that laypeople who are familiar with dharma knowledge try to teach other laypeople but the respect and faith is stronger towards the *samgha* and thus they will listen to the *samgha* more than the laypeople. He added that the nuns have helped the society not only through prayers, but have induced positive changes in the lives of some members of the community. For example, Tshering Gyaltzen, a local contractor from Phulusu who was commissioned to build new toilets and a new kitchen at the nunnery⁹⁵ said,

The older nuns perform *Nyungne* and the people are very proud. It helps local people also when the nuns advise them about dos and don'ts [in daily life]. I stopped smoking and eating tobacco and my wife also stopped after five of them [relatives] went to Jachung Karmo for the practice. No one takes tobacco in my house.

⁹¹ Complete prayers for the deceased (especially the 21st and 49th day)

⁹² Annual family *pūjā*, which is extremely important and followed very strictly in Bhutan

⁹³ It is also a prayer for the deceased to Buddha Amitabha.

⁹⁴ Those who have completed Buddhist philosophy studies in the Gelug tradition, which is equivalent to a Ph.D.

⁹⁵ An interview with Tashi Zangmo, the director of the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation (BNF) reveals that it was BNF that sponsored the new toilets and kitchen

Tshering Gyeltshen added,

In the villages, monks do not practice like the nuns. Nuns are capable and give so much help to the local people by reading the sutras, reciting prayers and performing rituals as it is very difficult to get monks to do these from the *dzong*. We have more faith and devotion towards the nuns than having a layperson to do these prayers for the deceased. When it comes to the fasting retreat prayer (*Nyungne*) the nuns are far better than the monks. So they really should help and are very capable of performing the rituals and other dharma activities.

Singye Dorji said,

Nuns to me are those who stay in the mountains or above the villages to help sentient beings and we hope they will practice and help. They are our devotional and respectable field of merit who clear the obstacles of the people. From my side, I see nuns and all *samgha* as the real Buddha.

Therefore, Singye Dorje wishes all nuns to learn, practice and share their knowledge with the laity but at the same time he said that the nuns' progress depends on their teacher and if the teacher does not teach and does not know what is good for him, how is it possible for him to help the nuns and the villagers? Indeed, from my observation, the degree of discipline and training of the nuns, especially the younger nuns is relatively low. Here, I make a comparison with the nuns in the nunnery I studied in India. The nuns here do not come to the most important part of the prayer for the fasting practice which is the taking of the Mahāyāna *sojong*⁹⁶ or precepts at the beginning of the *Nyungne*. If the *sojong* vows are not taken, then the nuns will not follow the precepts of eating only one meal a day, non-drinking and observing noble silence during the retreat. I noticed the nuns leaving the prayer hall every now and then. Moreover, most of them did not participate in the prostrations, the core practice of this fasting retreat. The young nuns went out, chatted or pretended to go to the washroom and then lingered between the kitchen, prayer hall, their own rooms and the toilet, in hopes of killing time. The *umze* and one or two senior nuns were the only ones who were really practicing sincerely and the laypeople present there were observing everything and noting the faults of the nuns. The lack of discipline could be due to the carelessness of the nuns themselves but upon

⁹⁶ *Sojong* vows entail 1. Not taking life 2. Not stealing 3. No sexual misconduct 4. Not lying 5. Not taking intoxicants 6. Not sitting on high and great seats 7. Not eating at inappropriate time and 8. Abstaining from perfumes, necklaces, jewelry, songs and dance.

closer scrutiny, is strongly attributed to the lack of guidance and discipline imposed by the teacher, who himself, lacked discipline. The young nuns from the Wolakha nunnery did not listen to the senior nuns as the former just came to Jachung Karmo and had not yet built a relationship based on mutual respect with their seniors. In fact, I observed the young nuns talking back to the older nuns as their monk teacher trained them in this manner, perhaps to create a schism for some ulterior motive. This is definitely not in keeping with the *śramaṇerikā* precepts of rejecting the good advice of senior nuns.

Upon conclusion of the first day of the fasting retreat, we went to bed early at 10pm. I wanted to charge my camera but found out that the only electricity source, the solar power is insufficient to charge electronic equipment. Dismayed, I decided to sleep but the nuns kept coming and going from my room as they were curious to meet and talk to me. This was a good opportunity for both them and me as according to the retreat rules, we are allowed to talk that day though we couldn't eat and drink after noon.

On the second day, the rising bell rang at 3a.m and it was pitch dark outside when I went to brush my teeth and wash up. It was also very quiet as the retreat rules dictate noble silence from bedtime onwards until the morning of the day after tomorrow. The silence was broken only by the sound of the strong and cold wind that blew against our faces. I felt the freezing breeze and water deeply penetrating into my bones, causing a sharp and chilly pain from within the bones. This is what one would expect at an elevation of 1,200 metres above sea level.

After washing up, a few nuns with some laymen gathered at the temple as the prayer bell, signalling the time for the prostration practice rang. We gathered for the daily *sojong*⁹⁷ ceremony. This was followed by three sessions of the fasting practice in a day with short toilet breaks in between. As observed the day before, many nuns did not attend the *sojong* ceremony, making themselves busy by running to kitchen to get food during

⁹⁷ Taking of the eight Mahāyāna precepts from the Triple Gem of Buddhism, i.e. the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha presided over by the *umze* followed by the purification prayers and rituals.

breakfast, lunch and dinner. The kitchen is normally closed for rest of the community other than the working nuns and helpers like the altar attendant, cooks, sick nuns and *nyerpa* as they have to take care of guests and see to the overall food preparation for all retreaters. Somehow, these young nuns bent the rules to ‘escape’ from the rigorous retreat which requires heavy physical activity and no food and water.

Although the fasting retreat can be daunting to many practitioners as one has to do many full-length prostrations throughout the day while chanting without being able to drink a single drop of water, I felt my body and mind getting lighter and happier. My body was so light as if it was floating in the air. My heart was so calm and peaceful—a sense of genuine tranquillity free from worries and worldly concerns. I could really chant and prostrate very well and fast without feeling the least bit tired though I was not able to talk, eat and drink. I did not get much sleep yet my mind was very fresh and alert. Each day, I looked forward to the fasting practice as the melodious chanting really touched my heart and the surrounding is so sacred that one feels as if one is truly in a heavenly realm. I did not encounter any difficulty though sitting crossed-legged for hours on the cold and moist temple floor without proper cushions, no food and drink and very little sleep. In fact I felt very energetic, both mentally and physically, with a very light body, bright and clear thoughts and lots of inner peace.

The surrounding mountains added to the beauty which influenced my perception so positively that everything I saw automatically became beautiful and serene. The mind ceases to judge and nothing seemed to agitate the mind—not even the incessant giggles and whispers from the young nuns during the prayers or their loud chatter during break-time. Although such experiences are written in texts, it was indeed very strange to experience it for myself. All I could hear was the sonorous chanting, singing of beautiful praises to the Thousand Armed Avalokitēśvara accompanied by mesmerizing music.

Four days after I arrived at the nunnery, I saw three horses approaching the nunnery carrying my things and the nunnery groceries and vegetables from Guma Goenpa, the village temple where we kept it. The horses, after their three-day stint at another place were now available to carry our things. This is one of the major challenges in the nunnery, trying to get supplies delivered in time for nunnery activities. The nuns could not fetch the supplies in time for the retreat because it was raining for hours at end almost everyday. Moreover, they were occupied with the fasting retreats. Though three horses were needed to bring my things and other perishable goods, the younger nuns still had to collect the remaining things three days after the delivery by horses, which is seven days after the actual day of purchase from the shop and the donations from the generous sponsors.

The very next day after all the supplies had been delivered; the nuns checked the stocks in the store and found that the supplies were insufficient. Hence, the *nyerpa* Tshering Yuden and the *drungyig*, Namgay Lhamo had to trek downhill once again for more shopping. They went to Punakha and stayed at their respective family homes for a few days and then proceeded to Thimphu to collect their monthly stipend from Dratshang Lhentshog. Since it was already the end of the month, it made sense to do the shopping and collection of the stipend all at once so that they need not trek up and down time and again. Thus, they took ten days to return to the nunnery but before they went to Thimphu they bought the necessary requisites and called the young nuns to collect it five days after they left the nunnery.

The monthly stipend obtained from Dratshang Lhentshog for an ordinary nun is Nu. 1705 but after deducting Nu. 600 for meals and Nu. 5 for the stamp duty, the nuns receive a total sum of Nu. 1100 per month. In the past, the nuns' monthly stipend was a mere Nu. 200 which the nuns had to rely on for their full sustenance since they did not receive any

food from the nunnery as there was no community kitchen⁹⁸. During my field research, the monthly stipend was Nu. 1705 for ordinary nuns, Nu. 2705 for the *drungyig* and *nyerpa*, and Nu. 3000 for the discipline master and the teacher.

The next day, four junior nuns had to go to the village to lead a *Nyungne* fasting practice requested by a family. It was an individual family who hosted the prayer but it was held at a village temple in Kabisa, about half an hour's drive to the east of Punakha.

Back in the nunnery, the retreat was still ongoing. That day, the monk teacher came to visit me during breakfast and it was also the day that I was not observing noble silence. He discussed about his and the nuns' lives and studies, practice and things that needed improvement in the nunnery. He kept on talking from nine in the morning until five in the evening. He even had his lunch with me. Though I lost one day of my practice but I managed to get him to talk about the nunnery and the nuns as according to the nuns, he is most of the time out of the nunnery; being young and immature himself.

The teacher rattled on and I was getting impatient as it was dark and I planned to take a bath that evening, after waiting for my turn for seven days. Considering that I was a guest, the young nuns were kind enough to find firewood for me to boil water for my bath. Once ready, Bolo (nick name), the youngest nun called me from my room and led me to a space just beneath the open-air kitchen. The path was lighted by a solar-powered light fixed by two monks several months earlier who obtained sponsorship from Taiwan. As one might expect, there was no bathroom so I had to bathe out in the open. Thankfully, there was some shady spot for me to take cover. The little but strong nine-year old poured the hot water into a steel tub and beamed proudly. Bolo even offered to scrub me clean but I politely refused. She explained that the young nuns help to scrub one another to

⁹⁸ The present community kitchen only commenced when the young nuns from the Sangchen Dorji Lhundrub Choeling nunnery in Wolakha joined the Jachung Karmo Nunnery as a result of a merger between the two nunneries in March 2012 which are now under the patronage of Yab Ugyen Dorje, the maternal grandfather of the present King of Bhutan.

make the most of their bathing experience since they have to wait for days for the next opportunity to bathe.

The *Nyungne* retreat continued for another ten days, totalling seventeen days. On each alternate day, we could break our silence and take one meal and a drink. Those were the days I grabbed the opportunity to interview the laymen in the retreat who would otherwise be difficult to reach once they return to their villages. Firstly, the villages of Thara and Tsendeygang are a good five hours' walk from the nunnery and secondly once they are back in their village they would not be able to spare the time to sit and talk to me as they have to work in their fields to earn their living. I also seized the chance to interview some nuns and got to know more of them but at the same time I kept a low profile as it was after all, a retreat and I did not want to disturb their peace of mind as well as my own with thoughts of the past and future. I wanted to dwell in the present which is so calm and peaceful. However, peace was short-lived as during our inevitable toilet visits, we were preyed upon by leeches. Once I was sitting with the nuns to have lunch and I suddenly felt an itch on my cheek. As I instinctively touched my cheek to scratch, I felt something wet, slimy and wriggling and at once I screamed and showed it to my friends. One of the nuns took the poor leech off my cheek and caught it in her hand. With blood-stained fingers, she gently put it back to nature safe and sound, carefully abiding by the precept of non-harming of sentient beings. The nuns then tried to reassure me that it was just a harmless leech, no big deal—at least not for them, though. The nuns are used to all these creepy creatures and were the least bit bothered by it. It was I who was petrified to the point that I could not even bear to look at the slimy creature.

The fasting practice was rather smooth for me as I have practiced *Nyungne* retreats several times before since I was young. I could not say the same for most of the nuns as they kept trying to run away from the retreat as much as possible. Whenever they had to trek a few kilometres downhill to collect vegetables and other groceries for the kitchen

and temple, they would be delighted. They didn't mind doing the arduous uphill climb with a load of vegetables on their backs. Even Bolo was very excited about trekking down to fetch the heavy groceries. The senior nuns pitied her and told her that she need not go but she insisted on going anyway. Young nuns, who are children, after all, prefer doing outdoor activities which is like fun and games for them than sitting quietly in meditation or reciting the prayers in a retreat. Only a few of us including the two laymen fully participated in the seventeen days retreat. Otherwise most of them missed quite a number of sets of retreat running about citing nunnery errands or some illness or other as an excuse.

Finally, the last day of the retreat came. The teacher finally decided to make an appearance after missing the entire retreat. It was after all, the climax of the retreat where a grand dedication ceremony was to be conducted for the sponsors and the deceased. The teacher graced the occasion for a short one hour. I noticed that he was puzzled and nervous during the dedication prayers which he was supposed to be leading. Instead, the *umze* had to preside over the dedication ceremony to save him from the embarrassment of incompetency in front of all the nuns as well as the lay participants. Thereafter, he kept a very low profile and avoided contact with most of the nuns. Two days later, he went to Punakha with two young nuns for unknown reasons.

After nine days the four nuns who went to preside over the fasting retreat in the village returned and another four went to replace them for another four sets of practice. By then Tshering Yuden and Namgay Lhamo were back in the nunnery from their trip to Punakha and Thimphu and their teacher who went with the two nuns also returned. Almost all the nuns were back in the nunnery except the four that went to the village to conduct the fasting practice and two who went home as they were unwell and needed to see the doctor.

5.2.3 Scandals, Exploitation and Delusion

One day, after the evening prayers all the nuns were asked by Namgay Lhamo and Tshering Yuden to stay back in the prayer hall because they wanted to distribute the nuns' monthly stipend. Also, they wanted to announce all the expenditures and income during the recently concluded seventeen-day *Nyungne* fasting practice in the assembly of the nuns and monk teacher. I did not go to the meeting as they preferred me not to come as it was their personal matter. But after an hour, Namgay Lhamo, the secretary, came running to me, seeking help to clarify the accounts as there was a shortage of Ngultrum 100,000. They told me that the teacher was pressing the numbers so fast on the calculator that his computations were different from theirs. The teacher demanded that both Namgay Lhamo and Tshering Yuden pay the remaining sum of money from their own pockets since it was their 'mistake'. Namgay Lhamo was all teary-eyed when she came to me, not knowing where to procure such a huge sum of money to balance the account. I asked if her teacher was comfortable with my intervention since he was the cause of the problem. In fact, I wasn't at all comfortable with intervening as I was worried that it was against a researcher's ethics but I could not refuse the nuns who were in tears. Actually, prior to the meeting, I had double-checked the accounts upon their request and everything was in order then. What could the problem possibly be? As I reluctantly stepped into the temporary prayer hall, the monk teacher was waiting for me to assist in the calculation. I then requested him to double-check the accounts based on what Namgay Lhamo and Tshering Yuden read out to him earlier, the only difference was that this time I read out carefully what they had already prepared. Since the teacher himself agreed that I could come and explain, I let him calculate in whichever way he wanted to, based on what I was reading to him. To my surprise and horror he did not know how to use a calculator and his calculation was a total mess! He was embarrassed and taken aback when the calculations proved correct and not a single cent was missing. The nuns were relieved but

the teacher was not happy with me seen through his facial expression though he did not say anything to me.

Once we were back in the room the nuns came to me and said that this was not the first time that the teacher had found fault with their accounts and almost every month, they had been obediently putting in a few hundred Ngultrum from their own personal savings. The senior nuns complained that the teacher was spending the nunnery funds in the pretext of doing work for the nunnery, e.g. repairing the nunnery road etc. but in reality he bought himself a car and thus is spending most of his time out of the nunnery learning driving. I observed that there are two camps in the nunnery. The senior nuns, much older than the monk teacher and have been in the nunnery for years formed one camp and the other; the young newcomer nuns from Wolakha. From the young nuns' camp, were some who were very close to the teacher and did not divulge his secret to others, especially not outsiders like myself. It is these young nuns whom the teacher took with him everywhere he went, even as far as Thimphu, and that too, according to the senior nuns, for no apparent reason. Many senior nuns and a few laypeople I interviewed claim that the teacher was having illicit sexual relations with his students, misusing his position as a teacher and demanding that they obey his every command.

During the teacher's absence from the nunnery, several nuns approached me privately or in groups of two or three and reported the same. They were seizing the opportunity during my interviews with them to reach out to someone for help without the teacher's knowledge. Some nuns even told me that those young nuns were being sexually used by the teacher's friends as well, and would do whatever the monk teacher told them to. Either these young nuns did not seem to understand that being a nun, or even a monk for that matter, entails keeping lifelong vows of celibacy or they were so obedient to their teacher that they could not refuse his 'instructions'. Whatever the reason, I will never know for

sure as these young nuns refused to be interviewed and were almost never in the nunnery going on outings with their teacher.

Overall the nuns are young and naive that some of them got trapped in the delusion of their teacher. The nuns are not exposed to the outside world other than their village home and the nunnery and when they meet someone who entices them about the beauty and happiness of the outside world they get carried away and their practice degenerates. Moreover, because they lack education, especially monastic studies which include subjects such as moral ethics and monastic vows (*Vinaya*) and secular education which can sensitise them on the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, these nuns are open targets for sexual abuse. I have observed great potential in some of the nuns but it is a pity that they are unable to utilise it to the fullest because they lack guidance from a competent and disciplined teacher who instead of guiding them on the proper path and practice was taking advantage of them.

I tried to talk to some of them whenever I had the opportunity and was even willing to teach them whatever knowledge I have but they came for one or two classes and then never showed up again. In some aspects, the lack of attention and monitoring from the government and the practice of sending young and incompetent teachers to the nunnery is a core contributory reason for the nuns' relatively poor state of empowerment and practice. On the other hand, I have observed that the nuns themselves lack the willpower and courage to progress academically and spiritually. Many are quite content to carry on with their old ways of living and present status in society. The nuns are merely paying lip service by saying that they feel proud and happy to see a nun prospering in monastic studies and aspire to secure monastic education. But when they receive the opportunity to study, even for a few days from visitors like myself, they lack the willpower and consistency as they do not see the benefits of education and prefer to while their time away. They seemed to lack motivation in their spiritual practice as well.

5.2.4 The Earthquake

It was 7 p.m on 3rd September 2012, Namgay Lhamo and I were in our room doing our individual prayers. Similarly, many nuns were either in their own rooms or in their friends' rooms engaged in their own personal activities when all of a sudden an earthquake struck and shook the whole building. The tremors came from above where the prayer hall was. It came down with a loud whistling sound. The nuns from almost all the rooms screamed and ran helter-skelter out of their rooms. I was worried about the old temple which was half-destroyed by an earthquake on ironically the same date and time a year earlier. I had good reasons for my concern as some of the nuns were sitting around a fire at the makeshift kitchen which was next to the dilapidated building. It was a rest day after the eight sets of fasting retreat which concluded on 30th August and some preparations were underway for the next three-day intensive prayers for Lama Ngawang Pekar, the founder of the nunnery. I thought the old temple might have been fully destroyed and gone down the cliff leaving nothing behind as the cliff is steep, just like the parts of the temple that crumbled and tumbled down the year before. My roommate and I quickly ran towards it but found that the remaining building was still standing and the nuns were safe and sound. In a few minutes we started getting phone calls from friends and family checking to see if all was well. I called my mother in the capital to check if they had an earthquake. To my surprise they did not experience any tremors but my two brothers in southern Bhutan did.

Three days after the earthquake, Namgay Lhamo and Tshering Yuden left for Punakha again to buy some groceries to be used as offerings and other necessary prayer materials. I felt very sorry to see these two nuns trekking up and down from the nunnery to Punakha and back almost every week to buy groceries and things for the nunnery and nuns. The town is more than half a day's walk and as we have seen, the jungle pathway is gruelling and the roads in poor condition. Each time the nuns make the trip, they are putting

themselves in danger. They are both above forty years and I noticed that each time they returned from town they were unable to walk or even stand upright for days at end because of deep sores in their feet, swollen legs and backache. Furthermore, once they are back in the nunnery they are not even able to rest as they have to supervise the preparations for the prayers, food for the nuns, guests and sponsors as well as handle the nunnery accounts. In addition, they have to bear the loss of cash due to their teacher's miscalculations and his lavish spending habits at the expense of the nunnery because he does not bother to provide the nunnery with receipts at the end of the month. Had the nuns been educated, even if only in basic mathematics such as additions and subtractions, they would not have been cheated. All these difficulties arise because the nuns are deprived of basic education.

5.2.5 Lama'i Kuchoe

By the time of Ngawang Pekar's annual death anniversary prayers or *Lama'i Kuchoe*, the nuns who went home for medical treatment as well as those who went to the village to lead the *Nyungne* fasting prayers were back in the nunnery. The nuns prepared the venue first and foremost by cleaning the temple and its surroundings the whole day. While some of the nuns were cleaning the place, others went to fix the water pipes to ensure that there was no leakage or breakage in the pipes during this event as there were going to be many monks led by a high monk or *lama* coming to perform the prayers. Besides, many sponsors and guests will also participate in the prayers. The nuns do not perform this prayer and rituals, the reason being that the nuns have neither received any training nor the opportunity to conduct such prayers on their own. In my opinion, the nuns are capable if they are given the opportunity as they are the ones leading the *Nyungne* fasting practice, giving *sojong* vows to all retreat participants during the *Nyungne* retreat and doing all the chanting and playing of musical instruments for the rituals. The nuns even know how to prepare *torma* (ritual cakes). Honestly, I did not see much difference in the preparation

of *tormas* for this death anniversary prayer and that for the *Nyungne* retreat except that the ritual cakes were more elaborate and there was an additional cake for the protector deity. After the cleaning and other preparation works were done, the nuns went to pick up the groceries and prayer supplies and to receive monks who had to come a day earlier for the *torma* preparation since the nunnery is very remote. On the same day towards the evening at 4 pm, eleven government officials such as engineers, financial officers etc. led by the village headman came to inspect the temple so that they could write a report and proceed with the drafting of the plans to rebuild the temple. The nuns prepared lunch for them as they were informed in the morning that the delegation was coming by noon. However, some of the officials could not complete the uphill trek up on time. Fortunately, they all carried their own packed lunches and survived climbing uphill for nine hours, leaving Punakha town at seven in the morning. When they arrived, they went to the old temple and inspected the interior and exterior and went to the temporary prayer hall to pay respects and offer some donations. Afterwards, a nun offered them late lunch as it was already prepared but they refused to eat saying that they already had lunch but accepted tea and snacks from the nuns. After that they all went back and the nuns worked on preparing for the next day's prayer. They continued running here and there as they were continuously asked by the monks to bring item after item. Four monks were involved in the preparation and the remaining four hovered near their *lama* who was to lead the prayers— resting and enjoying the cool breeze while gazing at the beautiful sunset. Two monks were testing the musical instruments like *gyaling*⁹⁹ to be used for the actual prayer.

The next morning began with a beautiful and bright sunshine. The nuns were really excited and looking forward to this day because to many of the young nuns, they were about to get fifteen days' holidays after the prayer as this was the last important event of the year in the nunnery's calendar. Another reason was that the nuns would get a welcome

⁹⁹ A trumpet-shaped musical instrument which has a high-pitched sound

reprieve from the monotony of going through the same routine day in and day out. On that special day, they would get many visitors and outsiders participating in the event including the *samgha* from other monasteries. They would also get cash and offerings from the sponsors who only come once a year. So it was a real blessed day for the young nuns from Wolakha. By noon, a group of five sponsors arrived at the temple. They were mostly women led by an ex-nun from Zilukha Dewachen Drubthob Gonpa¹⁰⁰ in Thimphu. The women were mostly from the Women's Association of Guma Gewog from around the villages surrounding the nunnery, especially the nearest village, Thara. These women brought offerings to the nunnery and the community of nuns as well as for individual nuns whom they are related to or are acquainted with. Among them was a lady I knew as she was a nun at the Zilukha Dewachen Drubthob Gonpa, close to where I lived and did my primary schooling at the Zilukha Primary School. As a student I used to visit the nunnery every Sunday and during school holidays. I had many nun friends there who used to come to my home almost every day and if they were not free during the day they would come at night. My childhood was always spent with nuns or the elderly participating in prayers and other religious practices unless I was in school. My friends would invite me for parties but I loved to be in the temple with my nun friends and the elderly engaging in prayer and listening to religious sermons (*dharma* talks).

5.2.6 Routines

On ordinary days, i.e. when there are no special prayers or retreats, the nuns follow a fixed routine (see Table 5.1, p.166). They do not get up as early as during the fasting practice at 3 a.m. Their day begins at 4.30 in the morning with a rising bell with half-an-hour to brush and wash up. By 5 a.m. they have to be at the main hall for morning prayers, with a gentle reminder by a light bell. The morning part emphasizes on the practice of

¹⁰⁰ Commonly known as Zilukha Nunnery

purification of the body, speech and mind so that the whole day's activities will be pure followed by the praises to the Twenty-One Táras (Tib: *dolchoe*) – female Buddhas, to kick off the day. The praises are repeated two, three and seven times with offerings of beautiful chanting, music and hand *mudrās* which take about one hour to complete.

Table 5.1: Summary of Daily Activities for the Nuns at Jachung Karmo Nunnery

Time	Activities
Daily routine from Monday to Friday:	
0430-0500	Wakeup call/ Rising bell and washing of face and brushing teeth.
0500-0600	Morning prayer (<i>Namjom</i> and <i>Dolchoe</i>)
0600-0730	Memorizing texts and reporting it to teacher
0730-0800	Breakfast (Tea with biscuit or <i>Zaw</i>)
0800-1000	Memorizing texts and prayers
1000-1130	Reporting the memorized text to teacher
1130-1300	Lunch break
1300-1500	Musical Instrument learning and practicing
1500-1700	Learning and practicing of making ritual cake
1700-1800	Dinner and rest
1800-1900	Evening prayer for protectors/ <i>Solkha</i>
1900-2000	Memorizing and revision of the memorized text and <i>Tsigjor</i> (reading with spelling)
2000-2100	Practice and learning of Calligraphy/ Handwriting learning and practice
2100-2200	Learning and practice of rituals/ <i>Cho-ga</i>
2200	Bedtime
Saturdays: Usual timetable but class time is used for doing chores.	
Sundays: Rise at 5.30am, morning prayers until 7 am followed by breakfast. Rest day.	
Seasonal: Several festivals in a year, e.g. 2 days Losar (New Year) on the 1st two days of the 1st month of lunar calendar, the reversing day in the 11th month, and Blessed Rainy day in the 8th month.	

Source: Fieldwork 2012

This is then followed by the memorization of prayer texts and other sutras given by their teachers. Once they have memorized certain pages, verses or sentences the nuns have to report and recite to the teachers from memory. Some nuns could memorize very fast while others took a few hours and even take days to memorize a very short verse. By the time most of the nuns recite their memorized text to their teacher it is time for breakfast which consists of just butter tea and a handful or two of *zaw* (roasted rice) or a few pieces of biscuits. Breakfast is for an hour after which the nuns continue to memorize prayers for another two to three hours. The senior nuns who have already memorized those prayers do their own individual prayers and practices. The young nuns start coming

to the teacher from 10 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. to report the memorized text. Those nuns who are sharp and can memorize fast come first and the slower ones come later towards the end of the session. According to the nun teacher who is responsible for this particular lesson, some nuns never come to report their learning for days and she has to chase after them and yet they will somehow give excuses and come after many days for just the same stanza that most others would be able to grasp within half a day. So she told me that she is not sure if they are doing it on purpose due to laziness or if they are really foolish and slow, as far as memorizing and learning is concerned.

The simple lunch of rice and one vegetable is served at 11.30 a.m. continued by an hour and a half break. Most young nuns chit-chat and play around during their break hours but the older and mature ones either do their practices and prayers, memorize texts or take a cat nap before the next session begins at 1 p.m. Since it is the sleepy and lazy part of the day for many, some nuns learn and practice musical instruments to keep them awake. Each learn a different instrument and they are helped by nuns who have some knowledge of music. They have to rely on one another because this class is supposed to be taught by the monk teacher who was almost always absent from the nunnery. Those nuns who know how to play certain musical instruments were from Wolakha nunnery in Punakha who came up to study after the nunnery joined with Jachung Karmo in the beginning of the year 2012. The learning and practice of musical instruments is for three hours after which they practice making ritual cakes or *torma* for two hours before dinner. The nuns knead dough using *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) as a base to practice the making of *torma* and the same dough is also used for the practice of making the *karjen*, the sculptor decoration of the ritual cakes with coloured butter made in the form of different flowers, deities, symbols and many other things related to the practice. This is then followed by dinner at 5p.m. for one hour where nuns gather outside the temporary makeshift kitchen to have the same dish as lunch—rice and one vegetable again. Once dinner is finished and the

washing of the plates and cups are over, the bell rings at 6 p.m. to signal them to gather at the temporary prayer hall for their evening prayer. The evening prayer is done for the protector deity with black tea and *sur*¹⁰¹ offerings.

The nuns' daily routine ends with the revision of texts already memorized in the morning. This is done through repeated recitation of the same texts or spelling it aloud to ensure lifetime retention of the information in the memory. The nuns also utilise this time to practice calligraphy and handwriting. They were given examples in their calligraphy books by their teacher in advance. The nuns had to copy the example and write it repeatedly to fill up the pages so that they can show the teacher the next day. Since many of the nuns do not know the importance of education, they are satisfied with just knowing how to read the texts and recite simple prayers. The nuns go to bed by 10 p.m.

On Saturdays the nuns follow the same timetable for the prayers but the class timings are used for cleaning the nunnery and its surroundings, collecting firewood and doing their own chores like washing clothes, cleaning their rooms and drying their beddings in the sun if the day is bright as most of the time it is moist and damp in the rooms. On Sunday the timetable is slightly different because they wake up an hour later than other days which is 5.30 a.m. in the morning with prayers until 7 a.m. and after breakfast the rest of the day is a leisure day for them. Some nuns go to town as they are used to trekking up and down the mountain but most spend the day at the nunnery with friends. It was during these times that I conducted the bulk of the interviews and focus group discussions with the nuns as they were busy on weekdays. Most nuns came to me to talk about their studies, practice and the importance of studies. They were also curious about my life, the life of the nuns at Jamyang Choling nunnery where I studied and their interest to get a proper monastic education. Some nuns in the second camp were not open at all and those

¹⁰¹ Aroma or smell offering to the unseen beings such as spirits and demons so that they do not harm any sentient beings in search of food and drinks. This offering is done with the burning of a mixture of five foods of milk, butter, flour, honey and sugar. Sometimes, people also burn biscuits as *sur* offering.

were also the group of nuns who spent most of their free time with their monk teacher whenever he was around. These nuns, according to the other nuns and from my own observation, having acquired their teacher's favour boss others around in the name of their teacher. Apart from their daily practices and studies the nuns engage in seasonal practices like the eight sets of the *Nyungne* fasting practice which they conduct four times a year during the first, fourth, sixth and eighth month of the lunar calendar; Lama Ngawang Pekar's death anniversary prayers for three days, two days of New Year or Losar as it is called in Bhutan in the first month of the year, Blessed Rainy day or *Thrué Bub* in the eighth month, *Nyinglog*¹⁰² or the reversing day of the year in the eleventh month, and so on. There are also other unexpected prayers held when suddenly the village people come to request for prayers for the sick and deceased. Once in a while the nuns also receive orders from the government through Dratshang Lhentshog to do recitations of certain prayers for a specific number of times for which the nuns are given a stipulated time to complete.

5.2.7 Vacation and *Tsechu*

After Lama Ngawang Pekar's death anniversary prayers, most of the nuns went for their fifteen-day vacation to their respective hometowns to visit their parents and family. Some went back to their nunnery in Wolakha. Namgay Lhamo and I went to Punakha. My friend and I trekked down the steep slope slowly as most parts of the path were wet and slippery from the previous night's downpour. After a long distance, the rain stopped but every hundred meters or so there were fallen trees on the road which we had to climb over to get to the other side of the road. It took many hours to even reach halfway to Punakha. Fortunately we had a nun friend, Lungten Wangmo who was staying in a small hut midway between Punakha and the nunnery. A short distance from her hut was Guma

¹⁰² Marks the day of transition from long days to shorter days

Goenpa where the Jachung Karmo nuns always take shelter if they are late to either go up to the nunnery or down towards Punakha. The nuns and nunnery also hire the horses for an exorbitant price of Nu. 500-800 per trip to transport their things and buy local vegetables and cheese from them. Since we were once again caught in the rain, we had to take temporary shelter in the temple. In the meantime the host of Guma Goenpa was kind enough to prepare tea for us and while having tea she prepared a delicious lunch. We all had a hearty meal of *ema datshi*¹⁰³ with fried cheese, *daw*¹⁰⁴ and green vegetables. After that, we went to visit the village temple and the host lady's fruit trees and vegetable garden from where she asked us to take as many fruits and vegetables as we wanted.

Towards the evening at 4 p.m. we left Guma Goenpa to visit Lungten Wangmo. She was patiently awaiting our arrival and gave us a warm welcome with hot tea and local snacks as it was a cold day due to the heavy rain which lasted several days. My friend's aunt was with her to help her cook and prepare tea for us while her cows were grazing nearby. Her aunt lives close by and she often comes to see her niece, recite mantras and helps to cook and wash her clothes and dishes as a respect to nuns. Her aunt spends her time looking after the cows while her husband works in the field and children go to school. Lungten Wangmo studied with me for a few years at Jamyang Choling in India. She left the nunnery in year 2000 when her uncle who is a learned monk teacher in a monastic university summoned her back to supervise the construction of his temple. Since then she has been bogged down with providing menial labour for him, relinquishing the precious opportunity to pursue monastic studies in India. Surprisingly, her uncle, while being learned himself, did not see the importance of monastic study for his niece who already had the rare opportunity to study at a nunnery institute offering the highest curriculum of monastic studies. Forget about continuing her education in Bhutan, she has not had the time to do even basic spiritual practices such as her daily prayers and meditation since

¹⁰³ chili cheese

¹⁰⁴ liquefied yoghurt

she left India. However, Lungten Wangmo was not at all perturbed by the loss of opportunity to study. She looked quite content with her present life of providing free labour for her uncle.

I see striking similarities between the nuns at Jachung Karmo and independent nuns like Lungten Wangmo who lack the motivation to improve their religious knowledge and spiritual practice. They lack the basic altruistic motivation so important to Vajrayāna Buddhist practice, i.e. to lead all beings to the enlightenment state. Forget about leading others to the enlightenment state and benefiting their communities through giving spiritual instructions, the nuns lack the basic capacity to practice for their own enlightenment as they are not even knowledgeable about the basics of Buddhism.

When their practice is not fully developed, these nuns are all the more vulnerable to temptations from the outside world. Restraint is an important element of monastic practice but many of the nuns at Jachung Karmo, especially the young nuns do not even know this basic principle of Buddhist practice. It is easy for the nuns to side track from their practice when they are enticed with worldly goods. For example, Lungten Wangmo's uncle gives her expensive consumables like mobile phones, a laptop computer, a car, house and money in return for total submission to the uncle's wishes. She looked very happy and satisfied with all these material goods. While staying with her, I had the opportunity to interview her and had a glimpse of her daily activity. I tried to understand how she supports herself financially and how she balances spiritual practice and work; being preoccupied with temple-building and taking care of workers as well as young monks under her uncle. She had to cook two meals per day and prepare tea twice a day for them. In addition, she had to run to Punakha, Thimphu and Phuntsholing to procure construction material. She is very capable and has even won a court case with a village woman over rights to irrigation water for the village people. She is highly regarded by her community in terms of her ability to handle worldly matters. She told me that she went for short-term

retreats for a month or two but could not stay longer as she was summoned back to her supervision work by her uncle. She was worried to leave the construction work unfinished. Her mother and sisters provide some support in terms of labour but they rely a lot on her in many ways, especially in terms of financial support.

In the afternoon of the next day, we resumed our journey to Punakha. We had to literally run down the hill as the day was dark and cloudy. It was about to rain any minute but we managed to get to Punakha before the rain and there we met Namgay Lhamo's nephew and nieces and also Lungten Wangmo's monk uncle. We exchanged greetings and joined Lungten Wangmo's uncle to Khuruthang. Along the way, I managed to interview my friend's uncle as well as two of his attendant monks from a Buddhist University in Thimphu for monks—where he taught for more than twenty years and is still affiliated with—guiding the monks in meditation. After the interview and dinner we went to Namgay Lhamo's niece's house in Kabisa, about fifteen kilometers from Khuruthang.

The next day we went to visit Zangtok Pelri, a monk's temple where I interviewed some young monks while they were playing as it was their day off. These monks are supported by Yab Urgen Dorje—the father of the four Queen Mothers of Bhutan, who is also the patron of the Wolakha and more recently, the Jachung Karmo nunneries. Being in the middle of the town, the monk's temple has an added advantage compared to Jachung Karmo as it is far more accessible to the local community who can easily come to request for prayers for the sick, deceased etc. When we visited there was a family doing prayers for the deceased, conducted continuously for a week in the temple. During this time, the whole family camps in a tent. The monks receive huge donations through prayers such as these for the sustenance of their temple. I returned to Thimphu that very day.

Four days later, I was joined by my friends who wanted to attend the annual Thimphu Tsechu¹⁰⁵ festival held at the Thimphu Dzong. On such occasions, people wake up very early in the morning, prepare their best food for their packed lunch and dress in their Sunday best. Laywomen arrange their best jewellery and ornaments next to their bed before going to sleep the night earlier. The female dresses are usually very bright and colourful with beautiful patterns. As for monastics, regardless of the occasion and time of day, our dressing is the same. Generally, monastics or *saṃgha* do not have to worry about what we are going to wear. However, in Bhutan, the *saṃgha* are quite conscious of their attire. They wear the best robes made from expensive fibres and wear costly shoes. I even noticed that some of the monks and nuns go to the extent of wearing facial makeup and whiteners to make themselves look nice which is against the *Vinaya* rules for the monks and nuns. Either the *saṃgha* are unaware of the monastic code of conduct or purposely flout the rules in order to look good to impress others.

The three-day *tsechu* was attended by many nuns from Jachung Karmo Nunnery as well as nuns, monks, and laypeople from all over Bhutan. The Thimphu *tsechu* is an important event in the tourist calendar and is attended by tourists from all over the world. The *tsechu* is held in other districts as well, but in different months with different performance styles. A typical *tsechu* entails the performance of mask dances signifying the four *bardos* (intermediate state) of the birth and death, the dream-state, dying stage, dharma essence and becoming (rebirth) stage. It also showcases the effects of karmic actions done in this life through frightening visuals of hellish realms as retribution for negative deeds committed. The mask dances are performed generally by monks to raise awareness amongst the masses to live life according to the principles of the dharma, i.e. Buddhist teachings. From my observation throughout my growing up years, the elderly

¹⁰⁵ *Tsechu*, literally “day ten” are annual religious festivals held in each district of Bhutan with mask dances and other rituals.

seem to have a deep sense of appreciation of the elements portrayed in the dances as they have personally experienced many of the situations depicted in the dances and do not want to be trapped in a similar situation in their next life. The youngsters on the other hand attend the *tsechu* for fun to enjoy the fair and food stalls that the hawkers have set up to entertain the people and make their once-a year lucrative earnings.

I participated in these festivities to observe how nuns and monks behave in public gatherings, in town areas, their interaction with each other and the laity. I noticed a drastic change of behaviour in some of the nuns from Jachung Karmo when they are outside of the nunnery. When in the presence of monks outside the nunnery, these nuns are very timid and shy, can hardly talk and eat, lack self-confidence, are very polite, respectful, and self-sacrificing which we do not see in the nunnery among the nuns. In contrast, when at the nunnery, they were not respectful and even disobeyed the older nuns.

After the *tsechu* was over we went to town as a change of environment from the nunnery, temples and mountain. I was surprised that the nuns and monks were quite happy to be in town and enjoying their time in the market buying things and indulging in window shopping. On that same night my friends went to a village nearby for a fasting retreat with more independent nuns from Paro. In between I went to Zilukha Dewachen Drubthob Gonpa to meet with the Abbess to get permission to conduct my research at her nunnery as it was getting very difficult to go to eastern Bhutan where I originally intended to do my fieldwork. After listening to my lengthy explanation on the nature and scope of research, the Abbess gave her consent and promised to give a place to stay throughout the duration of my research. In the meantime, I went to Dratshang Lhentshog yet again to enquire about any possibility for me to gain access to conduct research in eastern Bhutan. The chief accountant was very kind and immediately called a monk who is the *drungchen* (senior secretary) of the monk body of Pema Gatshel Dzong via telephone which is under the jurisdiction of Dratshang Lhentshog. The accountant instructed the *drungchen* to tell

the administration of Jashar Goenpa in Pema Gatshel to accept me for the research. They have the power to dictate terms to the nunnery because the Dratshang Lhentshog is providing a monthly stipend to thirty nuns in the nunnery. I was asked to wait for a few days to get a confirmation from the *drungchen*. When I received positive confirmation within a week, the chief accountant advised me to go with the *drungchen* as he would soon be coming to Thimphu for some official work and will return to Pema Gatshel afterwards. I thought it best for the *drungchen* to introduce me to the nunnery so I waited for about two weeks to follow him to the nunnery.

5.3 Accessing Eastern Bhutan

20th October 2012 — The day finally arrived when the monk the *drungchen* was returning to Pema Gatshel after a few days' work in the capital. As promised, he escorted me from Thimphu right to Jashar Goenpa in Pema Gatshel. We travelled via the main southern gateway to Bhutan, i.e. Phuntsholing. It is nearer to reach Pema Gatshel if we travel via the plains of West Bengal, India rather than through central Bhutan which is mountainous. After crossing the Bhutan border gate, we went through the rough and bumpy roads of India. Even more worrisome is the risk of travelling alone on these isolated roads. There were several cases of Bhutanese people being abducted on this road by a gang of dacoits involved in the sinister organ trade. Just two days before, a Bhutanese man driving on this very road was kidnapped, his car stolen and his body found later dumped at the roadside with his kidneys missing. Also, since there were no bridges, we had to wade through streams and against strong river currents in our small Suzuki Maruti. Some areas had bridges but these were dilapidated. We were stopped in several places by groups of young Indian men but were fortunately spared as we gave some cash to them whenever they stopped us. We finally reached Samdrup Jongkhar at 2.15 p.m. which is the second most important Southern gateway to Bhutan, after Phuntsholing. We were so

relieved to reach Samdrup Jongkhar safe and sound because we took our own risk as there was no escort by the Indian army on that particular day.¹⁰⁶ To shorten the journey to reach Samdrup Jongkhar before dark, the *drungchen* took short cuts through remote villages which was frightening as there were no other Bhutanese cars on the road with us. Moreover, there were only two of us in the car. Upon reaching Samdrup Jongkhar, we continued our journey through scenic mountains and passed through many steep bends with beautiful villages and small houses scattered everywhere on the hillside. We could see and feel the difference between Bhutan and India immediately after crossing the border. I may sound rather nationalistic, but anyone who travels between the two countries could vouch that the instant one enters Bhutan, the air is purer and the surroundings far cleaner than its neighbour. We had to endure the dusty roads and the hot and humid climate while in India.

It became dark hours before we reached the nunnery, which was around 8 p.m. As we approached the nunnery, Jashar Lhundrub Choeling or just known as Jashar Goenpa I saw a *chorten* right above the main road. There were some nuns waiting at the gate just before the *chorten* holding white silk scarfs (Tib: *khatag*) in their hands which is a traditional gesture of welcome in Bhutan for special guests. When we reached the entrance to the temple, we were greeted by their teacher and some senior official nuns and immediately escorted to a guest house. We were then given tea and dinner. The *drungchen*, having completed his task of escorting me to the nunnery, left for his monastery to Pema Gatshel Dzong where he serves as a government officer monk.

¹⁰⁶ As per a pact between the two countries, Bhutanese are escorted by the Indian army from the Phuntsholing gate to a point somewhere halfway between the two southern Bhutanese gates. Another group of escorts are stationed at another point closer to Bhutan to take travellers to Samdrup Jongkhar.

5.4 Jashar Goenpa—the Rising Rainbow

Jashar Goenpa (see Figure 5.5, p.178) is a private nunnery run by a reincarnate (or Tib: *trulku*) male master, Gyaltshen Trulku Rinpoche located in Eastern Bhutan. The nunnery is situated in a village called Jashar Woong in Zobel *gewog*, Pema Gatshel district. This nunnery is associated with Anim Trulku, a female incarnate master who was a highly realized *yoginī*. This nunnery was founded by the previous incarnation of Anim Trulku—Anim Woesel Chöden in the late 1950s but taken over by Gyaltshen Trulku Rinpoche upon request by the local community and the students of the former due to its dilapidated state (after the death of its female founder).

The late Anim Woesel Chöden was from Goenpa Singma village which is about three kilometres from the nunnery. She later moved above Yongla Goenpa on a hilltop to live in solitary retreat, away from people who would come and disturb her practice. However, at Yongla Goenpa, there were only monks and *gomchen*. Since she could not live with them as per the *Vinaya* rules, she lived above the monastery on her own in a small hut. The protector deity of Yongla Goenpa, Tseringma did not allow Anim Woesel Chöden to live peacefully and created many obstacles for her practice—disturbing her either in dreams or during meditation. So, she decided to move to a new place. One morning, as she was looking out of her window, she saw a rainbow at a particular spot below. This phenomenon recurred for a few consecutive days at the same spot each time she looked down. She then named the place Jashar Woong meaning the ‘Ground of the Rising Rainbow’. Later, in 1958, Anim Woesel Chöden built a temple at this spot which she named Jashar Goenpa¹⁰⁷ or the ‘Temple of the Rising Rainbow’. She lived in this temple with about thirty disciples, comprising nuns, monks, laymen and laywomen. She later renamed the temple as Jashar Lhundrub Choling. Anim Woesel Chöden was a student of

¹⁰⁷ also known as Jashar Woong Drubdey

the famous master Togden Shakya Shri I, an incarnation of Drubchen Saraha¹⁰⁸. He had many disciples and out of them, nine were considered very learned. The most learned of these nine disciples was Anim Woesel Chöden, a woman! She dedicated her life to meditation and remained in retreat until her death in 1982.



Figure 5.5: Jashar Lhundrup Choling Nunnery, Pema Gatsel, Eastern Bhutan¹⁰⁹

The nuns in this nunnery practice Nyingma tradition although they have recently introduced the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, a blend of both in what is termed as ‘Ka-Nying’. The nuns here emphasize more on the intensive retreats of three, six and nine years. The main deities of this nunnery are *Guru Dewa*, *Tsendrali*, *Chenrezig* and *Amitabha*, and their practices in the retreats are based on the teachings and commentaries of Yogi Sakya Shri, an emanation of Maha Siddhi Saraha.

Jashar Goenpa is relatively well equipped, compared to Jachung Karmo in Punakha. Jashar Goenpa has a large main temple, common place for meditation, a guest house and other facilities. Since the takeover, there have been at least fifty nuns ranging from the ages of twelve to fifty-three studying and living there at any one time. However, the

¹⁰⁸ One of the Mahasiddhas considered as one of the founders of Vajrayāna Buddhist and particularly of Mahamudra tradition.

¹⁰⁹ Source: Fieldwork (2012)

construction had not yet been completed and funds still required for painting frescoes on the walls of the temple and commissioning of several life-size statues of important Vajrayāna Buddhist deities.

Jashar Goenpa is located at a very scenic place above the main road from Samdrup Jongkhar to Pema Gatshel, eleven kilometres before the actual Pema Gatshel town. A little further uphill from the conch-white *chorten* standing majestically at the nunnery entrance are a few small houses where old laymen and laywomen live in retreat. The nunnery provides the land but they had to build the huts themselves. Another few leagues uphill, is an old house used by Gyaltshen Trulku Rinpoche, now occupied by their Dayig/language teacher, an ex-monk with his wife and a five year son. Another small house next to it is used as a classroom to teach Dayig/language by this teacher. The old nunnery building opposite the new temple was shaken up by an earthquake in 2010. It is a two-storey building with several rooms on the first floor used as a nun's dormitory before the earthquake and two rooms on the ground floor. The bigger room was being used as a prayer hall in the past and the smaller one as a senior teacher's practice place. The walls had deep cracks, just like the temple in Jachung Karmo, was in danger of crumbling any moment. Hence, the top floor is not used. The ground floor was used as the study room in the mornings and evenings and in the afternoon, as their practice place for making *tormas* and rituals objects, and TV room. The room doubles as a butter lamp area awaiting completion of a proper butterlamping building. The nuns said that the old temple would most probably be demolished since the new temple had already been built.

There were thirty-two nuns and two teachers during the time of my fieldwork and another nine nuns in three-year retreats with one special attendant nun for them. The youngest was fourteen and the oldest nun, fifty-one.

I was given a room on the first floor of the temple which is exclusively for guests. There were a few other rooms but were all locked. These rooms contained a library with

very few books and scriptural texts and a store room full of extra cushions, a sewing machine, wooden masks and prayer tables. The immediate room next to mine was Rinpoche's room which was unoccupied because Rinpoche travels extensively around Bhutan and overseas.

After serving me dinner at my room, the young nuns took the pots and pans and went back to the kitchen but the *nyerpa* and another nun stayed back to chat for sometime before they went to bed. The next morning I did not go for the morning prayers as I was very tired from the travelling but I took a short tour around the nunnery, i.e. the kitchen and the nuns' living quarters. The young nuns were friendly and asked me to come in their room for tea. They also introduced themselves and showed their picture albums. They described each of the nuns in the picture and in one of the photographs was a nun who looked very bright and calm. I asked who she is and they told me she is their Anim Trulku, the reincarnation of Anim Woesel Chöden, the nunnery's founder. I immediately asked her name as she looked very familiar to me. When they told me her name I told them that I know her very well since she studied at Zilukha Dewachen Drubthob Gonpa in Thimphu when she was young. They were very surprised and I too was taken aback because before coming to this nunnery I tried to find out about this nun and no one knew her whereabouts. I even asked the head nun of Zilukha as they are in contact with each other but she too had no idea. I knew that she went back to her hometown in eastern Bhutan but was not sure of her exact whereabouts and here I was, right in her nunnery! I had even asked the *drungchen* but he too did not know about her. I had even asked the nuns and their teacher over dinner the night before. However, none of them knew whom I was talking about although Anim Trulku is none other than the reincarnation of their founder. The nuns then told me that Anim Trulku was now in Tashigang in her final year of her three-year retreat (Tib: *losum chusum*) with a few other nuns. I was rather disappointed to hear this but when the nuns told me that her mother was in the nunnery,

I was delighted. Anim Trulku's mother lives in a small meditation hut reciting the *mani*¹¹⁰ mantra. With all these discussions we did not realize that it was already lunchtime. The young nuns refused to let me go for lunch as they wanted me to have lunch with them.

After lunch at 1p.m, we all gathered at the prayer hall for the Amitabha (Tib: *yoepagmed* or *yoechod*) *tsok* offering as it was the 8th day¹¹¹ of the lunar calendar. On ordinary days, the nuns begin their day with a wake-up call (bell) at 4.30 a.m. Moments before 5 a.m. the nuns were already gathered outside the temple door and when the gong beat at 5 a.m. they all silently entered the prayer hall in an orderly fashion and sat for the Praises to the Twenty-One Tāras (Tib: *dolchoe*) and incense offering prayers for one-and-a-half hours after which they have a half-an hour rest before breakfast (see Table 5.2 as follows):

Table 5.2: Summary of Daily Activities for the Nuns at Jashar Goenpa

Time	Activities
Daily routine from Monday to Friday:	
0430	Wake up call
0500 -0630	<i>Dolchoe</i> prayer and <i>Sangchoe</i>
0630 -0730	Morning tea and rest
0730 -0900	Morning study
0900 -0930	Breakfast
0930-1300	<i>Dayig</i> (Orthography) and calligraphy class
1300-1500	Work
1500 -1600	Afternoon Tea
1600 -1700	<i>Solkha</i> /Protector prayer
1700 -1800	Dinner
1800 - 2030	Evening Study
2030	Bedtime (Lights off by 2200) ¹¹²
On Saturdays the nuns follow their timetable as above until morning tea. After that they go for firewood collection in the forest until 1 pm and then the usual work continues until 3 pm. Then the timetable follows again as of Monday to Friday.	
On Sundays the nuns will have their morning prayers as usual. After morning tea they clean the surrounding area and then after breakfast at 9 am the nuns are free to do their laundry and other private works. Morning prayer and evening prayers are conducted everyday including Sundays and public holidays.	
The nuns go out almost every day to perform religious rites and rituals and to read and recite prayers for the people. Sometimes all the nuns go, leaving behind one or two to take care of the nunnery and sometimes two or three depending on the peoples' needs.	

Source: Fieldwork 2012

¹¹⁰ Om Mani Padme Hung mantra, a mantra of Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion

¹¹¹ In Bhutan the 8th, 10th, 15th, 25th and 30th days of the lunar calendar are considered sacred. Therefore, spiritual practitioners put in more effort to perform good deeds by going to the temple to chant prayers, make donations or offer (light) butter lamps. Special prayers such as *tsog* offering prayers are held in nunneries and monasteries on these days.

¹¹² Nunnery rules stipulate that one can stay up until 10 p.m. if they are doing their homework or studying but otherwise all lights should be switched off by 9 p.m.

Breakfast doubles as lunch—rice with one vegetable which is almost always potato curry. Afterwards, the nuns study grammar and spelling, *dayig ngagdon* with their new teacher, an ex-monk, who came just two months before. The class began just three weeks before I came to the nunnery. This is then followed by calligraphy or *yigzug* class taught by the same teacher. Immediately afterwards, the nuns study rituals like playing of musical instruments, making of *torma*, learning hand *mudrās* etc. This subject was taught in the past by their older layman teacher who has been with them for thirteen years and who is still there with his wife but he now only plays a supervisory role as the senior nuns are now capable of teaching the younger nuns and newcomers. This teacher is a faithful follower of Gyeltshen Trulku who revived and renovated the nunnery after the first Anim Trulku passed away. This same teacher built and served the Rinpoche's meditation place in Tashigang Kangpar for many years before he came to the nunnery. All his six children grew up in the monastery.

The nuns also utilise the 1.00 p.m. to 3.00 p.m. slot to engage in minor works for the nunnery such as flattening the ground surrounding the temple and fencing the vegetable garden. If the workload is not much then some nuns continue with their classes while others engage in chores. The nuns have an understanding amongst themselves in terms of division of labour for the nunnery.



Figure 5.6: Jashar Nuns collecting and transporting firewood from the forest to the Jashar Goenpa¹¹³

I observed that the junior nuns were very respectful and courteous towards the senior nuns. Likewise, the senior nuns reciprocated by showering much love and respect to the junior nuns. The nuns work very hard and sincerely and are very strong. For example, they could carry firewood (see Figure 5.6, p.183) more than triple the load compared to my capacity and each nun easily lifted and transported a huge log which I couldn't even move from the ground. They were very co-operative with each other. The nuns helped to carry water for the retreaters as well because they have no water source and they have been using only rainwater until now. Without the nuns' help, the older people who live at the retreat place would have to carry water from the nunnery which is about 25 to 30 minutes' walk, almost double the time of an average person because they are old and weak. Once the water is carried until the retreat gate the attendant will carry it inside as outsiders are not allowed in. The nuns have to walk about kilometre from the main road to the nunnery temple.

¹¹³ Source: Fieldwork (2012)

Water was a pressing issue in the nunnery. Though there were proper toilets and bathrooms in the nunnery but because of water scarcity, the nuns had to ease themselves in the nearby forest. The nuns had to wash their clothes at Pema Gatshel town which is a good 12 km distance from the nunnery. The government was planning a water supply project for the people of Pema Gatshel near the nunnery. The nuns were hoping to tap this new water resource without having to foot the bill. In addition to improving the water supply, the Dzongkhag or the district administration had agreed to sponsor the construction of an additional two-storeyed dormitory for the nuns so that they could admit more nuns. Admission was then restricted because of insufficient accommodation.

When tired of classes, the nuns were refreshed with hot milk tea with biscuits or *zaw*. The nuns really enjoyed their tea and break while basking in the sun, chatting among themselves to catch up with their daily activities.

Being fully occupied with prayers, classes and chores throughout the day, dinner time was a welcome refresher for the nuns. So eager were the nuns to have their meal that even before the dinner bell rang, they paced back and forth in the kitchen armed with their plates and mugs. Some came with big utensils to carry food for themselves and their room-mates to be partaken in their own rooms. This was most preferable to the nuns as the nunnery had no dining hall and the kitchen was not big enough to accommodate the nuns during meals. At the most, only four to five nuns could fit in the kitchen at any one time—that too if they sat on the ground without any furniture. The kitchen had a small attached room used as a store and another small one at the back used for storing all the water cans and their alcohol utensils. I was rather surprised when I learnt that the nuns sometimes brewed local alcohol¹¹⁴ for certain prayers and also for their teachers' consumption.

¹¹⁴ Partaking and involvement in the sale and brewing of alcohol is a breach of both the lay and monastic precepts of Buddhism

On auspicious¹¹⁵ or sacred days, the nuns perform special prayers. On the 10th day¹¹⁶ of each month of the lunar calendar, they have Guru Dewa *tsok* offering practice. On the 8th day they practice Togden Nyishu *tsog* offering and the Chöd-*tsok* Rinchen Threngwa on the 25th. Another special day is the Lhabhab Duechen¹¹⁷, observed on the 22nd of the 9th lunar month (6th November 2012). In addition to these special days, the nunnery receives numerous visitors on a daily basis, mostly seeking prayers for the deceased or the sick.

One night the *nyerpa*, Tsheten Dema came to see me. She poured out her life struggles (see Section 6.2.2) to me and kept me awake till the wee hours of the morning. Tsheten was deeply hurt by her ex-husband and needed a listening ear. She was overwhelmed by emotions and ended up spending the night in my room. It didn't bother me one bit since I would have probably done the same had I been in her shoes.

5.4.1 A Nunnery of *Yoginīs*

One afternoon, a senior nun named Kunzang Wangmo, a *vajra* master of the nunnery who has completed nine years of intensive retreat took me to see the retreat houses from outside the boundary. Outsiders are forbidden to enter but the *vajra* master is allowed to enter as she is guiding the retreaters in the absence of their Rinpoche. She told me there were nine nuns in three years retreat with one nun to attend to them. The attendant nun's duty is to help the retreaters fetch water, procure groceries and other necessities from outside the nunnery, bring goods and parcels from relatives and friends, and perform certain rituals outside the retreat house. When people send food and vegetables to the retreaters, the attendant nun has to accept it on their behalf and keep it with her for three days. During this period, she has to perform a purification ritual every morning before the

¹¹⁵ On the 8th, 10th, full moon day, new moon day, etc. of the lunar calendar

¹¹⁶ In the Tibetan Buddhist world, including Bhutan, the tenth day is considered as Guru Rinpoche's day as he was believed to be born on the 10th day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar.

¹¹⁷ Commemorates the descension of the future historical Buddha Shakyamuni from Tushita heaven to enter into the womb of Queen Mahamaya, his future mother.

goods could be handed over and consumed by the retreaters. This is necessary to avoid obstacles for their practice which can manifest in any forms. The *vajra* master goes into the retreat house once in two days to check if they need any guidance as Rinpoche is only able to come once a year.

During Rinpoche's visit he interviews the nuns on their practice and progress and then gives new instructions in a group. So if one's practice is slow, it would be a struggle to cope and catch up with other friends because the next instructions are given collectively. If one has not completed an earlier task and has received a new instruction, it would not only be burdensome, but one will tend to forget the instructions since one needs to concentrate on previous instructions. Even if one remembers the instructions, the vision will not be as clear as when one immediately puts the instruction to practice. The nuns recounted that they especially suffered during the first seven months as the practice in the initial stage involved extreme physical hardship—one hundred thousand times each of full length prostrations, recitation of the Vajrasattva hundred-syllable mantra, *maṇḍala* offering and recitation of Guru Yoga respectively. The retreaters do their daily practices and commitments together. They have to cook for themselves as they are not allowed to eat food cooked by anyone else. They perform the incense offering accompanied by prayers in the mornings and the protector and *sur* offering prayers in the evening.

We then visited some of the old women staying in small retreat huts reciting the Mani mantra. One of them was the present Anim Trulku's mother who lives with a friend who had been in the nunnery for many years. Her friend raised her sister's two daughters and a son and sent them to become monastics during her stay at this nunnery. The son was still a monk at a government monastery in Pema Gatshel while the girls had disrobed and left the nunnery.

That day, some nuns went to fetch firewood for cooking whilst others were learning to blow the *gyaling*, cymbals and drums while others were learning to make *torma* and

its decoration with coloured butter known as *karjen mar*. Some were decorating the temple altar and others washed the new toilet built with funds from UNICEF for the comfort of the nunnery guests. The toilet, however, had not been able to serve its purpose because of limited water supply; hence, it was not opened to the public although it was already completed.

According to Kunzang Wangmo, Anim Woesel Chöden and her followers used to perform Mani Dungdrup and Vajra Guru Dungdrup¹¹⁸ during the first month of the lunar calendar and *Nyungne* Karpo Cha Gyed¹¹⁹ during the fourth month or Saka Dawa (Wesak). Kunzang narrated that there was no cremation ground for the people of Pema Gatshel upto a year before. Since an old man passed away at the very ripe age of 108, the people initiated the cremation ground in Chödphulung by cremating his body as a sign of auspiciousness. Now, the locals cremate their dead here instead of on their own land, as was the practice in the past. During those times, people had to perform cremations near their houses or in the middle of the villages due to land scarcity.

Kunzang Wangmo added that she completed her three-year retreat at Jashar Goenpa with nine friends. Sadly, one of them died seven months before completing her retreat. Kunzang went for another set of three-year retreat to complete a total of six years in Khabtey, Tashigang. She even proceeded to enter into a third set of three-year retreat to complete her full nine years' retreat in Tashi Yangtse. She was accompanied by three other nuns but after a year, two nuns became very ill one after another within a span of two days. They suffered the same illness—swelling on the right side of their stomachs and passed away on the same day. Kunzang told me that she was appointed *vajra* master in this nunnery by her guru while her surviving nun friend who completed nine years' retreat with her is now in Samdrup Jongkhar. That nun is now a *sungkhop* or guidance

¹¹⁸ One hundred million times of Mani and Vajra Guru mantra recitation

¹¹⁹ Eight sets of fasting practice

protector at a *dasho*¹²⁰'s house. Her role is akin to a watchman as the family lives in Thimphu most of the time and visit the big house and the nuns only once or twice a year in winter for a week or two.

According to Kunzang, the previous Shabdrung Rinpoche's wife Khandro-la visited the nunnery recently and she went into short retreat for two months. She obtained her teachings and instructions from Gyeltshen Trulku. She now resides and teaches *dharma* in the USA. She built her own retreat hut at the end of the row of retreat houses for nuns. In her absence, she allows the nuns to use it. Apart from Kunzang, there were five nuns who completed six years' retreat who have returned to serve the nunnery. Rinpoche summoned them back to train the younger nuns in nunnery management as the young nuns are inexperienced. The other reason for their coming back to the nunnery is that they had no place to further their retreat practice as the place in Tashi Yangtse where Kunzang and her friend went for nine years retreat was already full. The retreat house can only accommodate two nuns at the most. Even the retreat place in Khaptey had reached maximum capacity. Therefore, only the present Anim Trulku and three friends with an attendant from their batch could be accommodated there for their six-year retreat. Moreover, even the retreat house in the nunnery was full to the brim as there were already nine retreaters practicing there, including an attendant. Hence, not having sufficient space to enter into a retreat is a real problem for the nuns who would have loved to continue living in retreat to progress in their spiritual practice. All five of the six-year retreat nuns were given specific responsibilities by their Rinpoche, viz. as a steward (Tib: *nyerpa*), secretary (Tib: *drungyig*), nun teacher (Tib: *lopen*) to help the young nuns in their memorization and reading, discipline master (Tib: *kudrung*) and temple keeper (Dzongkha: *choepon*) respectively. Rinpoche told them that after fulfilling their duties for two or three years, they could return to complete their full nine years' retreat.

¹²⁰ High-ranking or rich officer

The nunnery retreat system dictates that once in three years, the retreaters are changed as the new ones go in and those who have completed come out and go to another place to continue. During the changing of the retreaters, i.e. once in three years, a Drupchen¹²¹ ceremony is held at the nunnery temple. In future, the nuns hope to have sufficient facilities for the retreaters to complete the entire nine-year retreat programme at the nunnery itself. The nuns assert that the current practice of changing venues and being assigned other tasks not only interrupts their spiritual practice which should ideally be continuous, but also wastes much time and energy. The present chanting master or *umze* is among the new nuns and she aspires to go for the three-year retreat but Rinpoche asked her to stay for a few more years to help guide the other nuns.

5.4.2 Nuns' Day Out at the *Tsechu*

It was a Saturday. The nuns were preparing the multi-coloured prayer flags to be hung on the Descendent day of Lord Buddha—on 6th November 2012. It was also the first day of the *tsechu* in Pema Gatshel Dratshang. It was a beautiful sunny day that all the snow-capped mountains surrounding the nunnery could be seen very clearly. The sky that morning was ocean deep and entirely cloudless. The monkeys congregated behind the kitchen to enjoy fruits and sunshine. The next day, all the nuns woke up early in the morning; eagerly awaiting the DCM truck to take us to the second day of the *tsechu*. Apparently, punctuality is not a virtue here. The truck which was supposed to come at 6 a.m. turned up an hour later. The driver made no attempt to explain why he was late. The nuns too were not perturbed by his lack of punctuality and demanded no explanation from him either. The nuns were either too used to this or were excited that they had the rest of

¹²¹ Literally “vast accomplishment,” is a form of intensive group practice with visualization, chanting, music, feast, sacred dances, rites and rituals to symbolize the depth, power and accuracy of the Vajrayāna Buddhism.

the day to enjoy the annual *tsechu*, especially the masked dances (see Figures 5.7 and 5.8, p.192 &193) which is the most awaited event in the calendar of every district in Bhutan. The nuns were dressed in their finest robes, with their pretty and shiny faces glittering in the morning sun. This was however not to last. The nuns, me included, were packed into the back of the truck and no sooner had we left the nunnery, we were overwhelmed by the diesel fumes and dust. I thought to myself, “What’s the point of dressing up in our Sunday best only to end up with layers of dust on our faces and robes?” It was fortunate that we are devoid of hair, so the wind could not mess that up.

When we finally arrived at the *tsechu* held at the Pema Gatshel *dzong* some 12 km away which took us forty-five minutes to reach, we were given a decent place to sit with carpets. The nuns sat together joined by nuns from another nunnery. We all packed our lunch and in the afternoon went to the *nyerpa*’s brother’s house in the police camp to have our lunch. At 7 p.m. we left for the nunnery and reached an hour later. When we returned from the *tsechu* we had two old couples who came back with us. They came to stay for a few days at the nunnery as they wanted to circumambulate the temple. The nuns took very good care of them, especially because these couples had worked hard for Rinpoche’s retreat place in Khaptay, Tashigang for many years.

On the third and final day of the *tsechu*, there was to be the Guru Thongdrol¹²² ceremony at the *dzong*. Hence, we had to reach the *dzong* at least half-an-hour before sunrise. We asked our truck driver to come at 6 a.m. but as usual he showed up at 7 a.m. This time, there was some agitation amongst the nuns who were getting impatient because we were all worried that we would not receive the blessings from the *thangka* if we were late. By some stroke of luck or rather, good karma as we believe in Buddhism, we managed to get to the *dzong* in the nick of time. Luckily when we got there, the *thangka* was still there and many people had gathered and were in line to receive blessings. As

¹²² This is a ceremony whereby a giant *thangka* painting of Guru Rinpoche is unfurled only once a year for everyone to catch a glimpse and has to be rolled back before sunrise.

ordained persons, the nuns were given the opportunity to receive blessing right after the government officers, i.e. before the laypeople. Monks and nuns still do command much respect in Eastern Bhutan. After all, the *tsechu* is a religious festival.

I noticed that nuns are well-respected in Pema Gatshel district. The people here talk to nuns with respect. Instead of shoving nuns off as is the practice in Thimphu and other parts of Western Bhutan, I got a sense of genuine appreciation and reverence from the local community here. The nuns were given a proper seating place to watch the masked-dances, which was not the case at the Thimphu *tsechu*. Here, the nuns were served the same drinks and snacks accorded to high-ranking officials and clergy—which is never seen in other parts of Bhutan. In Western Bhutan, ordained *samgha*, both monks and nuns, hardly get a place to sit at public religious events and are pushed from all sides. Even the highest *lama* of Bhutan, the Je Khenpo was not spared when he too was shoved by the general public at a religious gathering in Thimphu some years back. What more can be said of us, the ordinary *samgha*. The Je Khenpo was so taken aback by the barbaric crowd that he vowed never to give public teachings in Western Bhutan until the people showed some respect and discipline. Ever since, the Je Khenpo has mainly given teachings in central and Eastern Bhutan. Now I understand why the Je Khenpo thinks that the people of Eastern Bhutan are more worthy of dharma teachings—because the people have genuine respect for the Triple Gem, i.e. the Buddha, the *dharma* and the *samgha*.

That day, most nuns did not pack lunch as we were lazy to carry it. Later during lunch, the *nyerpa* went first to her police brother's house to cook and asked all the nuns to have their lunch there but many nuns went to a nearby restaurant to eat instead, perhaps had their coffers full with offerings and could afford to spend lavishly on expensive food. Only those who brought their packed lunch and a few other nuns came to the *nyerpa*'s brother's house for lunch. We cooked so much rice thinking that all the nuns would turn

up but they did not come and thus we had to leave the food for her brother and family to eat in the evening.

As it was the last day of the *tsechu* we received blessings from the Guru Tshengyed¹²³. This is the part of the *tsechu* whereby eight monks are dressed as one of the eight manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava and paraded in the *tsechu* after which all eight representations of the Guru are requested to sit in a row and receive offerings from the general public. This, in Bhutanese culture is deemed as a very high act of merit as offering to the eight representations is akin to offering to the Guru himself. Everyone present at the *tsechu* made an offering to these eight representations of the Guru. The nuns too were all too happy to make offerings and thus donated so generously. Apart from being a great act of merit and to seek blessings, the Bhutanese also believe that this act would clear away the coming year's obstacles. It was late evening by the time everyone had presented their offerings. The nuns and I were back at the nunnery by 8 p.m.



Figure 5.7: Traditional mask worn by a mask dancer at the Pema Gatsel

*Tsechu*¹²⁴

¹²³ Eight manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava

¹²⁴ Source: Fieldwork (2012)



Figure 5.8: Masked dancers performing at the annual Pema Gatshel Teschu¹²⁵

5.4.3 Suspicion and Paranoia

One morning after breakfast, three weeks after I set foot in the nunnery, I was summoned to an emergency meeting. Instead of having their usual language class, all the nuns and two teachers congregated in their classroom to discuss about the purpose of my coming to the nunnery. The two *gomchen* teachers, especially the new teacher bombarded me with a horde of questions ranging from my expectations from the nuns, monks and laypeople etc. The older teacher, who was initially receptive to my research apparently, had a change of heart. Both questioned my motivation behind conducting my research. I answered their questions to the best of my ability and requested them for their cooperation. The teachers refused to cooperate and demanded a letter of authorisation to conduct research at the nunnery from the Bhutanese Government. I tried to explain that I had come through my university and had even obtained permission from Dratshang Lhentshog in Thimphu. They insisted on a letter in Dzongkha from the government and

¹²⁵ Source: Fieldwork (2012)

dismissed my attempts to read the letters written in English from the university, citing lack of proficiency in the English language. The teachers then forbade me from administering any questionnaire or daily activities sheet or from interviewing any of the nuns. Thinking that the letter may be grossly delayed due to bureaucracy, I requested the nuns to fill in the daily activities sheet first and in the event that the letter from Dratshang Lhentshog was not forthcoming, they could keep the sheets and if I managed to obtain it, then I would collect the sheets at the end of my fieldwork. After repeated persuasions from my side, most of the nuns agreed to fill the forms but some nuns refused and handed the forms back to me after the meeting. I noticed that the new *gomchen* male teacher was hinting to them to not cooperate or divulge any information regarding the nunnery to me. As for the interviews, the teacher said even if the letter comes at the end of the trip they will only give two or three full days to interview nuns.

I was dismayed that the teachers suspected me of having a hidden agenda. I wondered what made them think along those lines. My attempts to explain the purpose of this research was for the benefit of the nuns fell on deaf ears. The teachers even openly accused me of using the nunnery as an excuse for conducting research for personal gain. They alleged that I would be the sole beneficiary of this research as I would obtain my degree at the expense of the nunnery and the respondents. They added that if I wrote anything against the Government, they would in-turn be blamed in future. I tried to explain about the concept of research confidentiality but to no avail.

The teachers were extremely sceptical about my usage of the daily activities sheet, alleging that it was cunningly designed to check on the teachers whether they were performing the programme according to their written schedule or otherwise. The two teachers were full of resentment and kept on arguing that the research impact arising from sharing the research information verbally would not be as detrimental to the nunnery compared with having the research results written in black and white which could not be

deleted. The information from my thesis would soon become known to the world and any shortcomings of the nunnery would be open knowledge to all. This, they cited, would cause irreversible damage to the nunnery's reputation and that of the nuns and teachers.

Their teachers' assertion had a huge impact on the nuns and their relationship towards me. The nuns viewed me with much suspicion from then on. They were extremely careful when talking to me, making sure that private information was not accidentally blurted out, lest it reached my ears. This was rather exasperating because I was not able to get the nuns to talk to me, hindering the progress of my research. The teachers' interference in my research was monumental. Not only did they brainwash the nuns to not cooperate with me, the teachers insisted that I collect data from them only, and not from the nuns. They even asked me to hand over the daily activity sheets to them so that the teachers would vet the sheets and fill them up on behalf of the nuns. I managed to contact Dratshang Lhentshog to expedite the letter. They promised to send the letter within a week. Until I received the letter, I was virtually helpless as I could not actively collect any data from the nuns and teachers. I had to make do with participant observation, which in my view, is still the best form of primary data and so relevant for the purpose of this narrative.

5.4.4 *Shabten and Mo*

It was the last day of October and more than half of the nuns went to the village to read *bum*¹²⁶ and perform other rituals like Jabshi and Mithrukpa. Only nine sick and working nuns stayed behind to take care of the cows, the nunnery temple, to cook and prepare for the Lhabhab Duechen which fell on the 22nd of the 9th lunar month (6th November 2012). On that day the remaining nuns had no class so I took the opportunity to ask the *nyerpa* to take me to meet Anim Trulku's mother who was in the retreaters' area reciting

¹²⁶ A collection of Buddhist sutras.

the Mani mantra. In the afternoon the nuns, the new teacher and the teacher's wives watched Milarepa's movie until dinner.

The next day, 1st November, was a government holiday as it was the coronation day of the 5th King of Bhutan. I went to Goenpa Singma with the *nyerpa* and a young nun to get potatoes for the *nyerpa*'s sister. I tried to interview members of the local communities but they too refused to answer saying that I needed to show them a letter from the village headman. The village headman was impossible to meet as he was almost always outstation and without the letter from the government, he too was hesitant to give permission to interview the people. So I returned empty-handed with the nuns, ending up carrying vegetables like potatoes, pumpkin, radish and cucumber. On the way, we stopped to get some things from the shop and there the shopkeeper lady gave us juice to drink as it was a very hot day and we had to walk quite a distance to and from the nunnery with all those vegetables on our back. We had tea when we returned and then washed clothes. The remaining nuns excluding the cow herder prepared for the Lhabab Duechen¹²⁷ prayers on the 6th as it was to be a big day as they have to offer everything in thousands and recite prayers and mantras also in the thousands. The ritual is named 'Namgyal Tongchod', meaning a thousand offerings.

That day, two nuns from Tashi Yangtse went home, one to attend her family's annual prayer and the other, to visit her sick mother. The nuns from nearby villages go home quite often but they always return within a day or two. Eight nuns returned two days later and the new teacher went to the same village and to the same house to perform the Mithrukpa and Jabshi. The *nyerpa* and I went to Pema Gatshel, Nangkhor and Kheri Goenpa to shop for the upcoming Lhabab Duechen with the same DCM truck from Goenpa Singma School. We had to return to the nunnery by van as the DCM truck failed to show up. Three hours later, the truck pulled over at the entrance to the nunnery,

¹²⁷ Descendent day of Lord Buddha

carrying our groceries. We noticed only later that some vegetables we purchased from the market were missing. That night, all the nuns had returned from their tour of duty at the villages and we all watched a movie on Dharma.

The next morning brought good tidings for me. After breakfast, most nuns were busy preparing *torma* (ritual cakes), *dug* (umbrella) and other ritual paraphernalia for the next day's grand prayers. I joined the other nuns to collect firewood. We each had to carry three rounds of firewood to the nunnery. While we were engrossed in work, Lam Neten, the *drungchen* and two monks from Dratshang Lhentshog visited the nunnery. They came to conduct a site reconnaissance for the water storage tank as UNICEF had approved sponsorship of the tank for the nunnery via Dratshang Lhentshog. The *drungchen* then handed me the much awaited fax copy of the permission letter from Dratshang Lhentshog. I heaved a sigh of relief and promptly handed the letter to the head teacher, the one who had been serving the nunnery for thirteen years. He silently accepted the letter.

I noticed that the nuns of Jashar Goenpa have to go out almost every day to perform prayers and rituals at peoples' house as it is the only nunnery that has a large number of resident nuns. Moreover, most of them are well-versed in the reading of the scriptures and performing rituals. Another important factor is that the nuns are guided by senior nuns, their teachers who have completed three and six-year retreats. Most important of all, the teachers are the ones who lead the prayers, e.g. performing dedication prayers in memory of deceased persons. Sometimes, the nunnery receives multiple requests that require the nuns to split into smaller groups. The local people are especially appreciative of the fact that the nuns leading the prayers have at least three, six and nine years' of retreat experience behind them.

The duration of the nuns' tour of duty at the villages depends on the type of services requested by the local community. The nuns go out for a day to recite prayers and sutras and for several days to perform death rites and to read the whole *Kanjur* and *Tenjur*,

consisting of 108 volumes of sutras and 225 volumes of commentaries respectively. Sometimes the reading of the sutras and recitations of prayers and mantras are requested in the nunnery and in return donations of cash and food rations are provided. However, the local communities still prefer to invite the nuns and teachers to their homes when it comes to performing death rites. A typical offering for a death anniversary rite at the nunnery was one pack of rice and Nu. 1500.

On alternate days, two nuns take turns to cook and another two tend to the cows for a week. Jashar Goenpa had four cows including a new-born calf. Many dogs could be seen in the nunnery. Plenty of food was wasted in the nunnery because there were several nuns who were unable to eat the community food—especially the potato curry served daily for all meals with lots of spices. The sick nuns try to cook some simple vegetables on their own in their rooms. The wasted food goes to the cows which also have to be fed with some grass or other types of fodder.

The sick nuns often avoid going to peoples' house to conduct prayers or *shabten* unless all the nuns are summoned to go because food is a problem. Nuns are not supposed to be picky with food. They can neither dictate their dietary requirements to the host nor remain hungry. Hence, they abstain from going out to peoples' houses so as not to upset the hosts. The paradox is that if nuns do not go out into their communities, they would be left without sustenance because the food and other necessities for the nunnery comes from these prayers that they perform in exchange for donations in the form of food crop like potatoes from the farms or cash, anything that the people feel comfortable to offer. Hence, those who do not go out incur a loss for themselves and the nunnery.

The next day, the nuns resumed their normal routine, this time with an additional request by the local community to read the Diamond Sutra. A teacher with five nuns went out to the village for another round of *shabten*. Another senior nun accompanied a young nun to the hot spring as the latter was in poor health. I did not get any chance to interview

the nuns as they were busy and after the evening prayer, they retired straight to bed. We continued to recite the Diamond Sutra the next day since it was an emergency prayer request which needed to be concluded as quickly as possible. In Bhutan and much of the Tibetan cultural area, people throng to astrologers, who are often monks to seek divination (Tib: *mo*) for even the slightest problem. The people are often advised to perform a certain number of specific prayers. Instead of doing prayers to clear their own obstacles, most people leave it to the monks and nuns to conduct prayers on their behalf, with a small ‘token’ of appreciation for services rendered. To keep themselves in business, astrologers would always cite some obstacle or other caused by some demon or spirit and always recommend ‘remedies’ which the people accept wholeheartedly and unquestioningly. As the old Tibetan and Bhutanese adage says:

Mo chig tab na dre chig thoen
(For every divination there is a corresponding demon)

Every 25th day of the lunar month, the nunnery observes the Chöd Tsok Rinchen Threngwa whereby offering prayers are conducted the whole day long. The Rinchen Threngwa (Precious Rosary) is a Chöd ritual practiced by Ka-nying traditions, whereby they visualize offering their body and all that exist in this universe to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The next day, all the nuns led by their teacher went for a twenty-one day *shabten* at a nearby village, leaving only ten nuns of which six went to Goenpa Singma, a nearby village to perform *sangchoe* until late at night. The amount of time the nuns spent going out into the communities had seriously affected their studies. Even their teachers complained that the nuns were never in the nunnery as they were busy doing *shabten* for the local communities. On the other hand, if the nuns do not go out, the nunnery’s means of sustenance would be affected. On such occasions when most nuns and their teachers were out in the communities, I seized the opportunity to interview the nuns, i.e. without their teachers’ and senior nun’s knowledge.

5.4.5 Festivities—Lhabhab Duechen

6th November 2012—the much awaited Lhabab Duechen Day had finally arrived. The nuns and teachers all gathered at the prayer hall to perform the *sangchoe* and *dolchoe* from 5-6 a.m. After tea at 7.30 a.m., we proceeded with the special prayer called Namgyal Tongchoe. Many people thronged the temple, taking advantage of the public holiday, bringing with them lots of offerings like butter for the lighting of lamps, cash, vegetables, groceries, etc. The *nyerpa* and the cooks were busy the whole day long, preparing tea for the visitors. Even the nuns in the temple had to recite prayers for the entire day. As a token of appreciation for the hard work put in by the nuns, it is customary for the nunnery to give offerings to all ordained *samgha*, i.e. nuns for conducting the prayers. The nunnery's treasurer (Tib: *ngulnyer*) stood up and distributed Nu. 100 collected from the laity's donations to each nun in the congregation. When it came to me, the treasurer just moved on, without giving me a share of the laity's offering meant for all *samgha*. I observed that the older teacher took great pains to ensure that his wife and other laypeople sitting in the temple got a share of the cash handouts. He gestured to the treasurer to give the offering to his and the other *gomchen* teacher's wife and to an old couple seated at a remote corner of the temple. When the treasurer did not notice, the teacher spoke out aloud and more vigorously to ensure that these laypersons were not left out. From his facial expression, I could tell that he knew that I did not receive my share as I sat right beside him but he ignored me. Instead, he was more interested in ensuring that the laypersons related to him who are not even ordained *samgha* were given a share of the laity's offerings meant only for the teachers and the *samgha*.

On that day, all the nuns and the teachers with their wives sat and ate together for the first time since I stepped into the nunnery a month before. Usually they take their share and go to their respective rooms to eat. We continued reciting the prayers until dinner time. After dinner, I noticed that the teachers were asking for wine and some of the nuns

were drinking as well. The *nyerpa* heated it up with butter and egg and they drank the liquor to their heart's content. I could not fathom the rationale for this indulgence nor was anyone interested in providing me with any explanation. I could understand if the young nuns were not aware of the basic precept of Buddhism to not ingest intoxicants but if the teachers, the upholders of the teaching themselves were indulging in this forbidden substance, what can be said about their teaching?

The teachers' wives, especially the senior teacher seemed to enjoy a lot of clout in the nunnery although their husbands were merely employees of the nunnery. The wives went about throwing their weight and making the nuns run personal errands for them. One day, the senior teacher's wife, whom all the nuns call Ama (mother) was very upset with the nuns that she kept on complaining to me throughout the day and scolding the junior nuns. She even made one nun wash both hers and her husband's clothes. The Buddha forbade ordained persons from doing menial chores as it would affect their practice. However, since the nuns themselves are oblivious to the *Vinaya* rules, what more can be said of the laypersons? Many nuns in the nunnery are not even ordained. They are merely dressed in the robes. Ordained nuns also lack access to the *Vinaya*. Before ordination, none of the nuns was briefed on the *Vinaya* rules. The *Vinaya* is guarded by the male clergy that even ordained nuns cannot access the *Vinaya*, citing some restriction which cannot be substantiated in the *Vinaya*. After all, nuns in other parts of the Buddhist world have access to the *Vinaya*; then, why not nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition?

5.4.6 Taking Nuns for Granted?

The next day was a Sunday and right after breakfast, the remaining nuns and I shaved our heads, took baths and washed our clothes. Choepon and another two nuns washed the butter lamp containers and another young nun was again made to wash Ama's *kira*. A few nuns decided to watch a movie on an old television hooked to a DVD player in a

room in the old temple since the teachers and most of their peers were still at the twenty-one-day prayer. The *nyerpa* was cutting her turnips to dry it for winter consumption. Two nuns who went home three days before returned by afternoon and brought us oranges and fresh maize from their own farm. The nuns who went to the village the previous day also returned by dinner time.

One morning, I interviewed the *nyerpa* for the entire morning until lunchtime. After that I scoured around for other nuns to be interviewed but could not find any who was free as some were washing clothes, some making dry vegetables for Ama like boiling the *sag*, cutting the turnips and radish, etc. More than half of the nuns were working for Ama as she was fencing her personal vegetable garden. Looks like Ama had once again put the nuns to work, pleased with the free labour she was getting at the expense of the nuns' personal time for spiritual practice. I wondered whether Ama would have done the same to monks had her husband been posted to a monk's monastery instead.

One morning, when the nuns were commissioned to read the Kanjur in the nunnery by some laity, all of a sudden a call came requesting the teacher and the nuns to conduct prayers at the cremation ground as the deceased's family would be bringing the corpse for cremation. The nuns prepared dough for *torma*, offering bowls, butter lamps, a vase and many other ritual objects to be used during cremation as the family requested the nuns to do so. The nuns waited and waited for the deceased's family members to fetch them from the nunnery but until 1.30 p.m., there was no sign of anyone coming. The nuns then proceeded to join the rest of the nuns at the temple to recite the Kanjur. The nuns later called to enquire—only to find out that the family got a few *gomchens* (lay practitioners) to perform the funeral prayers. It did not occur to the deceased's family that the nuns were waiting for them as no one bothered to inform the nunnery of the sudden change of plans. It seems that the community takes the nuns for granted as the nuns are always available at a minute's notice. It is also evident that the nuns are not the first choice

when it comes to performing important ritual prayers, of which, death prayers top the list. Although the nuns were ready to serve the community and went to great lengths to prepare for the death prayers, the laity preferred to engage *gomchens* who are not ordained *samgha* to finally preside over the cremation. The local community has a preference for *gomchens* and probably subscribe to the idea that the *gomchens* have more spiritual efficacy than the nuns, which is also what Gutschow (2004) observed in her fieldwork with the Zangskari nuns. The nuns silently let the matter rest without asking the family the reason behind their sudden change of mind. I observed that the nuns tended to accept whatever that comes their way unquestioningly, even if the local community takes them for granted. I am not entirely sure if this is part of the Buddhist practice of equanimity or that the nuns simply do not wish to antagonise the local community for fear of loss of sustenance in the future. The nunnery seemed to have a consistent flow of people coming to request for prayers. That very evening, a local man came with a pack of rice and some cash donation requesting for the recitation of the Praises to the Twenty-One Tāras (Tib: *dolchoe*) prayers, as a result of some divination or other.

On the last day of my fieldwork at Jashar Goenpa, I received a call at late afternoon from the *drungchen* saying that we were to leave soon and that he was on his way to pick me up. So I quickly packed my things and went to see the teacher who was having his lunch and then to the *nyerpa* to ask for her help to pack my things in her room. Then I requested a young nun to collect the daily activities sheet and to my dismay, found most of them empty. I did not say a word but thanked them all for being so helpful and cooperative. By 3 p.m., the *drungchen* and I left the nunnery for Samdrup Jongkhar and then through India and then back to Thimphu via the Phuentsholing gate.

5.5 Summary

In this chapter, the first of three results and discussions chapter, the two nunneries in this study were introduced. I described the remoteness of the nunneries, difficulty in accessing these nunneries, the nunneries' infrastructure and activities, including study programme, if any. I highlighted the history of the nunneries, its founders, religious personalities related to nunnery and tried to paint a picture of the study area, especially in describing the nuns, their activities as well as feelings, emotions and behaviours, i.e.— how the nuns live, how do they feel and what do they think about. I also introduced religious practices (daily prayers), seasonal and ceremonies/festivals (special days), the daily activities of the nuns and people connected to the nunnery, all the while emphasizing on the nuns' educational opportunities. This chapter also included a description of the relationships between the nuns, the nuns' relationship with monks, lay teachers, local community, outside community or visitors and the conditions and incidences that encourage or limit nuns' activities in the nunnery, as well as in the society. I explained the hierarchy of the nunnery, roles of the nuns and briefly highlighted incidences of abuse/exploitation of nuns and the conditions which encourage/limit/restrict nuns' activities and roles, once again, as a backdrop to the ensuing discussion in the upcoming chapter.

CHAPTER 6: INEQUALITY, PATRIARCHY AND FOREGONE BUDDHIST PRINCIPLES

6.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I led the reader through the corridors and prayer halls of Jachung Karmo and Jashar Goenpa to provide a general feel of the lives of the nuns in the two nunneries, as I experienced them. Still, my narrative of some of the happenings in the nunneries was based on my research lens and limitations of human perception. Therefore, to strike a balance, in this chapter, the nuns will speak for themselves. I will share their life stories in the context of the gender issues raised in Chapter Four of this thesis. Moreover, there are several other events in the life of nuns which happened before and after my fieldwork which to me is important to be included in this narrative. Wherever necessary I will also share my story, as I am after all, a Bhutanese nun.

6.2 Life before Renunciation

When someone renounces the lay life, the first question people would ask is what brought about such a decision. This is what Buddhist renunciants like I are asked time and again. Since going against the stream of the world to become a monk or a nun is a rare occurrence in society, it naturally arouses human curiosity. To satisfy this natural inquisitiveness, I begin this chapter with a narrative on the motivation of the nuns in the two nunneries studied in donning the robes of a Buddhist *samgha*, beginning with the life stories of Namgay Lhamo from Jachung Karmo and Tsheten Dema, from Jashar Goenpa. From their stories of life before renunciation, we will be able to appreciate the reasons for Bhutanese nuns in taking up monastic life.

Here, I have carefully chosen the term renunciation and the phrase ‘donning of the robes’ simply because not all of the nuns are actually ordained. Many are dressed as

female Buddhist mendicants but have not taken ordination; in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist context—novice ordination (Tib: *getsulma*, Skt: *śramaṇerikā*). I can only speak of novice ordination since full ordination (Tib: *gelongma*; Skt: *bhikṣuṇī*) is not available to women in the tradition due to severe patriarchal resistance in reviving the order, which I will elaborate later in this chapter.

6.2.1 The Story of Namgay Lhamo

Namgay Lhamo was one of the senior nuns at my nunnery during my fieldwork and this is her story. I present her life story in her own words, translated from Dzongkha into English with very minimal editing to capture her emotions to deeply understand her life circumstances which led her to renounce her laylife:

I have two elder sisters and no brother. Our mother passed away when I was about two years old and our father brought us up. My two sisters never went to school as they had to help in the field and with the livestock. Both sisters got married and stayed at home to take care of the land and house. The older sister has three sons and two daughters. The first daughter is at home in the village as she has never been to school like her mother. My niece is married and has a son and a daughter. My sister's second daughter is educated and she is working in the Department of Forest in Punakha. She too is married and has two daughters. My two older nephews are monks and the youngest is in lower secondary school.

I was sent to school in the village until standard two after which I had to drop out as my father could not afford to send me to school. I cried for days and nights, wailing and scratching the ground but had no choice as poverty took control over my situation. From then on, I began working in the field with my sisters and father—carrying dung to the paddy field, ploughing the land, growing rice and wheat alternatively in summer and winter as well as potatoes and other vegetables. I had to cook and clean the house, wash clothes in the stream and most of the time I had to go to the forest with animals as I was still young and not too strong to work in the field. I had to wake up early in the morning to prepare food for the family and the animals, feed them and clean their dung together with the cowshed before going to the forest before dawn with village friends, both boys and girls. My friends and I would spend the entire day in the forest tending to our livestock—cows, ox, horses, pigs and chickens—making sure they get enough grass to graze and collecting grass to be taken back home to stock up for the animals for the dry winter season. Sometimes I had to collect firewood to bring home. To find a proper place for animals in the forest too is not easy as it has to be conducive for grass, water, wood for cooking at home and extra grass to be taken home. After a long and tiring day in the forest, I had to prepare food for the animals, feed and milk the cows.

Work in the paddy field is even more back-breaking. We have to work in the field throughout the year. In summer, we plant paddy and in winter, we grow wheat and potatoes unlike some of the higher altitude places, where people do not have to work in the field but move to the lowlands or just rest until the next spring comes. A few days after Losar, we start to prepare the field for the growth of paddy seedling. For that we have to carry cow dung and put in the field in heaps, then we have to spread it evenly with the spade, then the men will plough the field with the help of ox after which the women will break the soil to make it soft and mix the dung properly with soil. Then we have to water the field and this too is very challenging. Firstly, water during the work season is scarce and secondly, for days and nights we have to fight with our fellow villagers over water as everybody wants to water their fields first to finish their work. We have to guard the water canal or else the water will be diverted somewhere within the split of a second. Once the field is watered well, the seeds are sown. While waiting for the seedlings to grow, the wheat grains will be ready for harvesting and the potatoes too need to be dug out.

Harvesting season involves the entire family. The harvest would be left to dry for a few days and then collected in heaps before being thrashed using our bare feet or by hitting a bunch on a piece of rock. Once the thrashing is over we dry it for some days and then store it in the store house. By the time we harvest wheat it will be time to prepare for the cultivation of paddy which has to be transplanted during the monsoon. So the fields are prepared as before with lots of water. While men are preparing the field, women uproot the seedlings and tie them into bundles according to size for easier grasping in our palms when transplanting in the wet fields. The day begins even earlier than other normal working days as we have to finish as much transplantation as we can. The village people will take turns to help each other to finish the work. We have to inform the villagers much earlier than on such and such a day, we would be carrying out transplanting work. Otherwise we will never get a chance.

On the day of our transplantation, apart from the actual fieldwork itself, we have extra work to prepare food and drinks for the workers, i.e. our own village farmers. When it is our turn, we have to wake up at around 2 a.m. to prepare breakfast for thirty to forty people whom we have to feed before dawn. Immediately thereafter, we have to prepare tea and snacks like *zaw*, *jaseep*, *geza seep* as snacks for breaktime. We have to carry all these on our backs in a big bamboo basket. The farmers and I would be working most of the time, even in the rain throughout the day, our feet already soaking wet in the muddy fields. By the end of the day our hands and feet will be sore from the earth and mud and we would be aching all over, especially hit by severe backache. This is because we have to bend down the entire day to plant the seedlings in the mud by pressing our fingers from one hand and the other hand holding a bunch of seedlings all soaked, wet and heavy. After planting, we just cannot sit back and relax. We have to monitor the water levels in the field, ensuring that the fields are full of water until almost harvest time. Fortunately, our village has ample water for the villagers with great blessings from Lama Drukpa Kuenley, the Divine Madman. He was supposed to have visited and blessed our water source. Till this day, the water source never dries even during prolonged drought when other areas in Bhutan are high and dry.

Concurrently with paddy, we need to plant chillies and other vegetables that are suitable during monsoon otherwise we will have nothing to eat our rice and bread with. Hence, in this way, work is never-ending. I was too tired of all these burdens and hassles but had no choice as there was no escape. Then one night when I was in the bed, I reflected on my life and it dawned on me that my life was devoid of any meaning. It was awfully mechanical—I felt trapped and stifled in this cycle of suffering with the endless burden of household and field work, year in and year out. It was a life full of misery and I was utterly miserable. I realized that everyone in the village suffered in the same way, meaning that we were all imprisoned in a quagmire with no escape in sight. Then, a sudden flash of insight hit me hard. There is a way out of this cyclic suffering. It became crystal clear that my only escape route is on the path to nunhood. I needed to become a nun and come out of this *samsara*. The next morning, I promptly asked my father's permission to allow me to renounce my worldly life. And amazingly, he and my sisters agreed! Then aged nineteen, without a second thought, I proceeded to the Thimphu Zilukha nunnery to become a nun.”

6.2.2 The Story of Tsheten Dema

Next, is the story of Tsheten Dema, an accomplished retreator nun from Jashar Goenpa. Her poignant life story, in her own words, as narrated to me in the Eastern dialect of Sharchopa brings her character to life and is presented here to illustrate her intense suffering in laylife which drove her to renunciation:

I was born as the youngest child in my family in the year 1973 in Chi-phong village, Pema Gatshel district. I have four sisters and five brothers who are now scattered all over Bhutan. My mother passed away when I was quite young. My father now lives with one of my brothers in Paro, Western Bhutan. My parents were farmers so I did not have the opportunity to go to school. I was betrothed (Dzongkha: *chung ngen*) at the tender age of eleven to a teenage boy of the same district. There is the tradition of child marriage in my region. I was in my in-law's house working like a horse day and night when children my age were going to school and playing. My would-be husband, only slightly older was enjoying his schooling days with my hard-earned money to become an educated person and to support his family in the future without any second thought of my suffering. I also had to work hard in the field to feed his parents and three siblings, his younger brother studying in the school, another brother who is handicapped and a younger sister who was also schooling. My so-called marriage was an economic arrangement between my parents and his as my in-laws were old and could not do much for their survival.

In my future husband's house I was the only one working, both at home and in the field. I had to single-handedly do all the household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing and tending to livestock in addition to the fieldwork. I had to do everything myself from ploughing to harvesting, with occasional help from my would-be younger sister-in-law. After the harvest I had to carry the products like oranges, potato and maize to distant places to sell so that we could buy things that we could not grow on our own. I had to carry the goods and walk for days to sell the products as there were no vehicle roads at that time. I could not afford to hire horses as it was very expensive. I used to carry triple of what an average man can carry. During those travelling seasons I did not get proper food and sleep. Sometimes I sold the farm produce for cash as we also need money to pay for the education fees and other necessities for the would-be husband and his siblings. Despite all my sacrifices and hard work to help him and his family with his studies, he went and cheated me with a village girl who was studying with him. The village girl was my sister-in-law's friend. His own sister used to come and tell me the news and sometimes the sister would show me the letters exchanged between the girl and her brother. Since I could not read, my sister-in-law would read these letters for me. For his sake, I was very careful not to let my in-laws find out about these letters. I dismissed it as 'puppy love' and thought that the affair would be over soon as he must be doing this to pass his time in college because he knew that I was in his house waiting for him to finish his studies and settle down. But as the years passed by, the situation became worse and their affair became more serious. My future husband started ignoring me and refused to talk to me. Yet, he was enjoying life with the other lady with my hard-earned money.

One day, after working like a horse in his house for 17 years, I finally told my parents-in-law that I was going back to my own house for good. They were taken aback as they did not know the reason. I told them everything and they insisted that I stay on and even promised to talk to their son. I was sceptical and said that it was of no use talking to their son as he was like a pig who does not understand anything. I knew that he would never listen to anyone, not even his own parents. I returned to my village, leaving behind everything. Although almost everything in the house was purchased with my hard-earned money, I did not take anything more than my clothes. Once at home I explained the matter to my brothers and sisters and told them that I could no longer bear to stay in that house on the basis of an undefined relationship. I told my siblings that I wanted to go to the nunnery to become a nun. My family tried to persuade me to return to the in-laws, saying that they would talk to them. They did just that but it was all in vain as the boy refused to listen as I am an uneducated girl. I was extremely heartbroken and angry to learn of this massive ingratitude. Not once did he think that all his education was achieved from my hardwork and support.

I sacrificed my childhood, youth and educational opportunity to slog day and night for him and his family. Moving on, I decided to go to Jashar Lhundrup Choling nunnery and registered to become a nun as there was a selection for new admission going on at that time. The person-in-charge in the nunnery said that they would let me know if I was selected in a few days. In the meantime with the help of my brother I went to the district court and filed a case against the man who was supposed to marry me. I was given the run-around by the court, which seemed to favour the man. Each time, the court would grant dates according to the convenience of the man. The court authorities never considered that I too worked for a living. They never asked me if I was agreeable to the date and time he chose. Worse still, the people working in the court were on his side and always asked me to withdraw the case and let him go scot free with the other woman. Why should I let him go? I want justice because I worked in his house for him and his family like a servant for seventeen years under the false impression that I would become the future daughter-in-law of the house. I was robbed of the opportunity to go to school and yet I accepted my fate and continued supporting him thinking that if he could one day secure employment in the civil service, everyone in the family would benefit. I was sadly mistaken as he only used me all these years and now that he had completed his studies, he wanted to have nothing more to do with me. He wanted to kick me out of his life and his home.

His parents were not happy with him and did not agree with his views. My in-laws preferred to have me around than their son and even asked their son to leave them but I knew this would only be temporary as eventually they would choose their own blood, however wicked the son is. After all, blood is thicker than water. The in-laws were willing to give me half of their property as well but I did not want that. I went to court to make sure that if he does not marry me, then he should also not be able to marry the other lady he was having an affair with. As per my wish the court's verdict was in my favour. After the court case ended, I went to the nunnery and became a nun in 2001 at the age of twenty-nine. My brothers and sisters disapproved of my becoming a nun as they thought I was making a hasty decision out of anger. They advised me to rethink my decision and decide when I had calmed down. They asked me to go to Thimphu and Paro to temporarily live with my brothers. They thought that a change of environment would help me and that I might even like it. I was firm and told them that I had already decided to become a nun and I was not going anywhere other than to the nunnery. I told them not to worry as I would not let them down by coming out of the nunhood in future. The suffering that I went through would be sufficient to keep me in the nunnery for life."

6.3 Going Forth: Transition from Laywomen to Buddhist Nuns

Going forth into homelessness¹²⁸ is a major life-changing experience. In the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition, once one ordains as a monk or a nun, there is no turning back. The only option out is to disrobe without a second chance of re-ordination. The stigma attached to a disrobed monk or nun is enormous, which is probably why Tsheten Dema's siblings wanted her to be absolutely sure of her decision before seeking ordination.

When I speak about becoming a nun in the context of my study area, it simply means leaving one's lay life, i.e. the household life in order to don the monastic robes and live in the nunnery. In some instances, one may have donned the robes, but still stays in the

¹²⁸ a term used to describe a /mendicant or ascetic

family home, observing vows of celibacy and keeping the minimum ten Buddhist precepts. Also, Bhutanese women in my study area may don the robes of a Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist nun but they may not all be ordained¹²⁹ nuns. In my study area, most of the nuns have not even taken the refuge¹³⁰ vows, much less novice ordination, paving the way for discrimination by the laity and subordination by monks as well as confusion in their spiritual practice.

During my fieldwork, there were seven senior nuns between the ages of twenty-three and forty-three and eighteen junior nuns between age nine and nineteen from Wolakha residing at Jachung Karmo Nunnery, totalling twenty-five. In Jashar Goenpa, there were thirty-two nuns who were not in retreat, nine retreaters (Dzongkha: *tshampa*) nuns and one attendant nun, totalling, forty-two. Three nuns, including the founder, Anim Trulku were in the nine years' retreat and seven in six years' retreat outside of the nunnery (see Table 6.1: 210, for the full breakdown of nuns in the two nunneries). The nuns at Jashar were between the ages of fifteen and fifty-one.

Table 6.1: Summary of Nuns in the Two Nunneries Studied

No.	Category	Jachung Karmo	Jashar Goenpa
1	Full-time resident nuns	7 (senior nuns)	32
2	Temporary nuns (e.g. from sister nunneries)	18 (junior nuns from Wolakha)	-
3	Nuns in retreat or <i>tshampa</i> within nunnery complex	-	10
4	Nuns in retreat or <i>tshampa</i> outside of the nunnery complex	-	10
5	Nuns in residence in sister-nunnery	64 (Wolakha)	-
TOTAL		89	52

Source: Fieldwork 2012

This study found that the nuns tended to join nunneries which are closest to their natal homes. The nuns at Jachung Karmo are mostly from districts in Western Bhutan, such as

¹²⁹ An ordained woman in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition is one who has taken thirty-six novice (Skt: *sramanerika*, Tib: *getsulma*).

¹³⁰ Affirming the Triple Gem/Three Jewels, i.e. the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as one's source of refuge. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is what makes a person Buddhist. In Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, objects of refuge also include the guru (Tib: *lama*), tutelary deity (Tib: *vidam*) and representation of the wisdom mind, the dakini (Tib: *khandro*) as well as one's own true nature mind, which makes it seven objects of refuge in total.

Punakha, Wangdi Phodrang, Gasa and Trongsa. Similarly, since Jashar is in Eastern Bhutan, most of the nuns come from within the region, from Trashiyangtse, Samdrup Jongkhar, Trashigang and Pema Gatshel districts. In addition, most entered into nunhood in these very nunneries¹³¹. Only a handful such as Namgay Lhamo went to Zilukha nunnery and Lopen Tenzin Dema became a nun near her own village at Ngedrupchoe, Punakha. Only one, Dawa Dema became a nun in Varanasi, India. From Jashar, only one became a nun in Paro Je-Tse Phug temple under Trulku Kuenga.

Almost all of the residents at Jachung Karmo during my fieldwork became nuns in their teens, except for two senior nuns. Lopen Tenzin Dema became a nun at the tender age of six and the discipline master (Dzongkha: *kudung*), Kinley Zangmo, became a nun just a year earlier, at the age of twenty-four. All of them became nuns on their own free-will.

This pattern is mirrored at Jashar Goenpa, with the majority joining the nunnery in their teens. Only two joined the nunnery in the twenties and two became nuns when they were seven years old. All joined the nunnery on their own accord except Norbu Lhadron, 32 who was in secular school for only seven days and ran away from school:

My father said I am useless in school and since our family did not have anyone in the monastic life, he asked me to learn religious texts so that I will be able to help at home in reading the sutra and some other prayers. Otherwise, even to read a short prayer, we have to rely on others. Thus, with this reason I was asked to become a nun and it was solely the decision of my parents to send me to the nunnery.

Overall, I found that there is no significant difference between the nuns at the government-run nunnery, Jachung Karmo, Punakha (Western Bhutan) and the private-run nunnery, Jashar Goenpa, Pema Gatshel (Eastern Bhutan) in terms of motivation to renounce lay life. In general, girls and women become nuns in order to pursue their spiritual path as they are inspired by the belief that as nuns they can contribute more to the wellbeing and happiness of all sentient beings through their good actions or prayers.

¹³¹ The Wolakha nuns became nuns in Wolakha nunnery

This corresponds to the ‘carrot of Buddhism’ thesis, i.e. people’s fervent faith in the Buddhist Triple Gem cited by Sharma (1977) in his analysis of ancient Buddhist women in India. In the Bhutanese context, these women just want to lead a simple and happy life and wherever possible, help others in return.

Although Namgay Lhamo and Tsheten Dema’s circumstances leading to renunciation correspond to the ‘stick of circumstances’, to escape the drudgery of domestic life and disillusionment with married life respectively, they are the exception rather than the norm. Contrary to popular belief which hinges on the theory of ‘relative deprivation’ as a motivation to renounce, very few of the nuns in both nunneries studied became nuns after their marriages broke down. At the Jachung Karmo nunnery, nuns who were in their teens spoke confidently that they became nuns because they wanted to practice the dharma. At this age, they were aware of the importance of dharma practice. One of the youngest nuns in the nunnery (14 years old) said, “It was my own decision to become a nun as I thought dharma is the best for our dying and death.” Another young nun, Pema Yangden age 21 years whom I interviewed at the private-run Jashar Goenpa told me:

I became a nun on my own as I have interest in the dharma. Though it was not difficult to work at home because I tend to cows, I very much wanted to become a nun. I came to the nunnery to become a nun at the age of seven with my older sister but I was sent back saying that I was too young.

Although the nunnery did not accept this nun when she was seven years of age, she succeeded to join the nunnery slightly after age twelve. I find some parallels between Pema Yangden’s story and my own. Ever since I was very small, about five years of age, I deeply aspired to become a nun. In my case, although I was born in Trashigang, Eastern Bhutan and had my early childhood education there, I grew up in the capital city, Thimphu. In fact, my parents hail from Thrisa in Zhemgang—the poorest district in Bhutan, but because my father was in the army, I did not stay in the village but travelled with my father wherever he was transferred, which explains why I can speak at least seven Bhutanese dialects and even Nepali language. In Thimphu, I lived close by to the Zilukha

nunnery in the Royal Body Guard (RBG) barracks with my sister and her husband who was a royal bodyguard. When not in school, I used to spend most of my time at the nunnery as a layperson mingling with the nuns, which I believe is where I was inspired to become a nun. When I was about nine years old, I had asked my parents' permission to ordain but they refused saying that I was too young. My parents and older siblings advised me to finish high school first and then see if I would still be interested to become a nun when I was older.

Just as I was constrained by my parents, inspiration alone is not enough for women to take the bold step into homelessness. As much as women would like to ordain as nuns, the reality of family responsibility before marriage, husband and in-laws restrict their lofty aspirations as they give in to marriage, social conventions, tradition and superstitions. The nuns in the two nunneries I studied in the West and East of Bhutan had similar constraints as women in other parts of the Himalayan region (Gutschow, 2004; Zangmo, 2009). A 25 year-old nun from Jashar Goenpa explained to me:

I wanted to become a nun since I was very young and thought of going to Nepal but could not go. Then I got married but we could not stay together as his parents did not accept me. Thus, I thought it is no use being in *samsāra* and thinking that I can help my parents through practice I came to the nunnery.

The above sharing also demonstrates another very important deciding factor in becoming a nun—the location and function of the nunnery. Bhutanese women do not always want to become nuns in Bhutan and many aspire to go to Nepal and India, which is also what I did as monastic education is still largely inaccessible to women in Bhutan. In 1993, when I tried once more to become a nun at the age of sixteen, there was not a single nunnery in Bhutan where I could pursue monastic education in Buddhist philosophy. I had already completed high school by then (Class X) and did not see the nunnery as a place to secure basic literacy, but as an opportunity to pursue religious studies in a systematic way. To my dismay, I found no such opportunity in Bhutan. Hence,

I was not too keen to remain in Bhutan because as I had experienced for myself, the nuns at Zilukha nunnery, being in the capital city itself, did not have access to monastic education. They spent their time chanting simple prayers in the nunnery or going out to perform prayers or *shabten* for the laity. My nun friends in Zilukha did not truly comprehend the meaning of the prayers they were chanting so they could not explain it to me. I craved to understand the meaning of the texts that these nuns so religiously read. I had heard from visiting nuns from India that there were monastic institutions for women which train women in Buddhist studies. I knew that the void I felt in religious practice could only be filled if I went to India.

One day, I overheard some nuns at Zilukha talking that an American nun, Karma Lekshe Tsomo was looking for four to five Bhutanese girls to study at the institute she had founded for nuns in India—the Jamyang Choling Institute for Buddhist Dialectics. I was thrilled and stepped forward to ask the nun planning to take those girls to put in a good word for me to study at Jamyang Choling. Knowing that my family would oppose my leaving the country, I secretly planned to go to India with two nuns from Zangskar, India. One week before my departure, I finally mustered enough courage to tell my parents and other family members that I wanted to become a nun...in India! My family, especially my father and sister, were outraged, but my mother and elder brother were supportive. However, they wanted me to become a nun in Bhutan but I flatly refused because I knew that I would never be able to understand Buddhism if I were to remain in Bhutan. Had there been monastic institutions for nuns in Bhutan, I would never have had to leave my country and cause anguish to my family. I only managed to see my family after more than three years due to the great distance between Thimphu and Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India, where Jamyang Choling was located. Three-year rotational visits continued for the next thirteen years, until I left Jamyang Choling to pursue my

M.A in Buddhist Studies at Delhi University in 2006. Today, there are more Bhutanese nuns studying outside of Bhutan than in Bhutan itself.

Though the majority cited altruistic reasons such as wanting to benefit more beings through their good actions, i.e. prayers and meditation, several indeed had difficult lives before becoming nuns. A third of the nuns I interviewed from both nunneries had very hard lives as laywomen prior to joining the nunnery. These women and even young girls had to endure so much hardship tending to the field, housework, taking care of children and not getting the opportunity to go to school like their male siblings. They had to wake up early in the morning and sleep very late at night to support their families. A twenty-five-year old nun from Jachung Karmo describes her life before becoming a nun, “I became a nun on my own because I couldn’t work in the field like my other sisters. When we work in the field, we do not even have time to sleep at night.” Another sixteen-year-old nun from the same nunnery couldn’t agree more and told me this is precisely the reason why she too sought refuge in the nunnery to escape from the gruelling work in the fields. These nuns’ reasons for joining the monastic community correspond to that of Namgay Lhamo’s, as narrated earlier in this chapter.

Many of them had to spend their lives outdoors, sometimes even for years at end, like for example, Kesang Wangmo, tending to livestock, hence, they never enjoyed any leisure time. A few of them were also cheated or rejected by their husbands and in-laws after being thoroughly exploited in the farm and household, doing the entire menial work, similar to Tsheten Dema’s story. A nun from Jashar Goenpa, age eighteen questioned the wisdom of leading a householder’s life in the village, “Why be in the village where I have to marry and suffer? Thinking this I came to the nunnery to become a nun.” An older nun (23 years) from the same nunnery also shrugged off the idea of married life in the village and added, “I did not want to suffer in the village like the other women. So I came to the nunnery.”

As illustrated in Chapter Four, Himalayan women associate the female body with suffering and *samsāra*. Similarly, some Bhutanese women in my study area, because they went through tremendous hardship as women leading a household life, aspire to be reborn in a male body. Many young women in Bhutan worry about ending up in their next lives as female (again) or even worse, in the lower realms as animals, hungry ghosts or in the hell realms, as per Buddhist cosmology. This is the reason why they decided to become nuns to devote their whole lives to religious practice, as a seventeen year old nun from Jashar Goenpa shares, “I was worried about the next life and thus thought it is best to practice to clear the path [to a better rebirth].”

Some of the nuns I interviewed became nuns because they were inspired by the nuns that they encountered, some of them were influenced by their friends and family who chose the monastic life. Lopen Tenzin Dema, the senior¹³² most nun of Jachung Karmo, aged 40 years told me how she was inspired by the previous abbess of this nunnery, Lopenma Paldon when she was a child, “I became a nun on my own when I saw Lopen Paldon. I remember running after her saying that I want to be a nun like her.” I will be discussing more about Lopenma Paldon and her lasting influence on the nuns of Jachung Karmo in Chapter Seven.

Adhering to family tradition is also an important factor in one becoming a nun, although the tradition is a dying one. In the past, as explained in Chapter Three, at least one boy from a family was sent to the monastery as it was compulsory to do so in medieval Bhutan. This custom was also copied by some families who sent their daughters to the nunneries as a family tradition. A seventeen-year old nun from Jachung Karmo shared:

I became a nun because my school friends went to the nunnery and also my aunt sent me saying that there is no one from the family in monastic life. I also became a nun in Wolakha and not in Laya because there is no nunnery there whereas they have a monk’s monastery.

¹³² Seniority in the nunnery is not based on age, but on how long one has been admitted to the nunnery, and most importantly, how long one has been ordained. Once one takes on a higher ordination, one becomes more senior than others who lack higher ordination status.

Peer influence was also high on the list of reasons why young girls especially, became nuns. A nun from Jashar Goenpa, 19 years told me;

I was influenced by friends because they asked me whether I wanted to become a nun. I said yes and came with them though at that time I did not know what a nun is. My parents stopped me but I did not listen to them.

Another nun, 23 years old, interjected, saying,

I came on my own freewill but with my cousin [who is also a nun at the same nunnery] and since she was going to the nunnery I decided to come with her. My parents did not stop me.

Another reason why women in my two study areas became nuns is because their parents could not afford to raise them or send them to schools. Though schooling is free in Bhutan, their parents could not afford to buy them school uniforms and in some cases the parents did not want to send their girl children to school as the schools were far (dangerous for a girl child to walk the distance). Moreover, families need their girl children to help at home, especially in the field, rather than to send them to school, which is similar to what Gutschow (2004) described in her ethnographic study of the Zangskari nuns.

There are even those who became nuns out of sheer curiosity as they did not know what the life of a nun entailed prior to joining the nunnery. Indeed, I have observed that the nuns in my study area haven't the slightest idea about what ordination vows entail, either before or in some cases, even after becoming nuns. For reasons best known to the *lamas*, the Buddhist monastic code of conduct (Skt: *Vinaya*; Tib: *dulva*) is a very secretly guarded text in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism and it is only studied once one takes ordination as a fully ordained monk. Since there are no fully ordained nuns in the Tibetan Vajrayāna tradition, nuns have no hope to ever uncover what is in the *Vinaya*, to the extent that they are even unaware of the content of the vows which they have so dutifully promised to keep.

In contrast, Theravāda and other Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions do not seem to have these restrictions in place. In Malaysia, I have picked up a book from the Sri Lankan (Theravāda) Maha Vihara temple in Brickfields called ‘Understanding the Bhikkhu *Vinaya* for Laypeople’, a book intended to educate lay Buddhists on the code of conduct of fully-ordained monks so as to sensitise the laity when dealing with monks. The *Vinaya* text, more specifically, the *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī pratimokṣa*¹³³ is freely available. I have also had the privilege to read the *Vinaya* only because I did my M.A in Buddhist Studies outside of the Vajrayāna Buddhist circle of influence and have come to understand that there is nothing intrinsically secret in the *Vinaya*. Its contents include the history of the precepts for monks and nuns, the precepts themselves, consequences of not following the precepts and of course, procedures for ordination, confession and other communion rituals etc. There is no conceivable reason why the Tibetan Vajrayāna clergy needs to hide the monastic code of conduct from the laity and worse still, from nuns unless there is some content which the male clergy does not want others to find out lest the nuns and laity keep the monks in check! Another important reason could be is that the patriarchal monastic institution does not want the nuns to know what their rights as nuns are as the Buddha placed many injunctions which monks must adhere to avoid exploiting the nuns in terms of resources, labour and also sexually. The nuns would then know that the nuns’ community was designed to be largely autonomous, whereby the nuns make most of the decisions collectively, which is not the case in either Jachung Karmo or even Jashar Goenpa. The overarching power of patriarchy can loom over the nuns as long as the nuns are blissfully ignorant of their monastic precepts which were formulated to protect the nuns, mainly from unscrupulous monks (Sujato, 2009).

It is not always easy to ordain as a nun because according to the Buddhist concept of karma, if one has not accumulated sufficient merits or exhausted the effects of previous

¹³³ prati-mokṣa, m. (√mokṣ,) liberation, deliverance • (with Buddh.) emancipation L • the formulary for releasing monks by penances Kāraṇḍ • -sūtra, n. N. of Buddh. Sūtras (Monier Williams, -)

negative karma, it would be difficult to become a monk or nun, even if one wanted to. This is the case of a twenty-five year old nun from Jachung Karmo who shared her life circumstances that made her decide to become a nun as well as the obstacles she faced before she could finally become one:

I have a five-year-old son as I had an affair with a monk but before I could marry him I was proposed to by another monk and he promised to look after my son (from the first monk). During childbirth I had to go through many difficulties as I was only 20 years old. I had to go for surgery to deliver my son and also suffered from jaundice. In fact, I am still suffering from it. Going through all these difficulties I decided to become a nun and my mother also agreed to send me to the nunnery, otherwise I will become pregnant again and suffer. I thought of becoming a nun earlier but I had to help my mother as the younger siblings were too small to help and I too had to bring my child up. Now that they are big enough to help mother and my mother agreed to take care of my son, I could finally come to the nunnery.

The preceding story offers a glimpse of how lightly many Bhutanese monks tend to observe their vows of celibacy. Many young Bhutanese women, especially young village girls in my study area fall prey to men, even monks and after going through affairs, marriages, divorce etc., these women finally decide to become nuns as they did not find any lasting happiness in relationships which not only changed ever so often, but also caused much hardship to women, especially those who were deserted by their partners and ended up becoming single mothers. As we have seen from this story, some Bhutanese women seek refuge in the nunneries to escape getting pregnant again since they are often preyed upon by men, and are not spared even by monks. They hope that once in the nunnery, they will be in a safe haven, away from the prying eyes of men. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as I will explain later in this chapter.

6.3.1 Life after Renunciation—Namgay Lhamo

Here, I present a follow-up of Namgay Lhamo, now as an ordained person; tracing her journey from the time she was first ordained to her experiences as a senior nun in Jachung Karmo Nunnery to understand her interactions and emotions as a *getsulma*:

Once I became a nun at the Zilukha nunnery in Thimphu, I stayed on for five years learning to read, play some musical instruments for the ritual practices, memorize prayers and chanting. The other nuns and I used to go to peoples' house for *shabten*. That was the time when Drupthop Thangthong¹ Rinpoche was still alive as well as his two consorts were taking care of the nuns. Dorji Phagmo¹, an incarnate nun, was very small and used to learn to read and write with us. The nuns and I did not have any difficulty in terms of sustenance and running the nunnery, except that the nunnery did not provide us with proper Buddhist education. At the most nuns knew how to read perfectly as we have to read lots of sutras like Kangyur and Tenjur and recite many prayers of Mother Tāra (Tib: *dolchoe*) and other obstacle-clearing prayers. Also, we did not have much knowledge on how to perform complicated ritual practices such as *torma*-making and preparation of the ritual altar when we go to peoples' houses and thus, were always accompanied and led by some monks; if not by laymen practitioners. Besides prayers and reading scriptures in the nunnery and in peoples' houses we had to go to the forest to collect firewood for cooking. Water was not a problem but we did not have toilets and we had to go to the nearby forest for that.

Within the nunnery itself, there were no major problems but individually some of us had financial difficulties as most of us come from far and did not have enough money to buy our necessities. One summer day, a few years after becoming a nun, my father came to visit me in the nunnery. I was very happy to see him and asked him to stay for a few days since he had come all the way from Wangdi Phodrang to see me. On the day he was to return, I asked him for some cash and I was sad to receive only Nu. 11. I then went through his wallet only to find that it was empty. He did not have a single cent to go back home. It was then I realised that he had travelled all the way on foot, traversing mountains after mountains to visit me. He was going to do the same and yet he did not say a word to me about his own financial difficulty. I cried and asked him to stay for a few more days while I tried to get some money from friends so that he could at least go home by bus. I thought that my suffering as a layperson ended when I became a nun but even as a nun, I was suffering, this time, mentally, seeing the suffering of my father and my sisters.

One day, sometime in 1993, we were having a Mani Dungdrup, which is a recitation of the Avalokiteśvara mantra for 100 million times. In between, Anim Wangmo, a senior *bhikṣuṇī* from Bhutan who spent most of her time in India came and asked if I and some of the nuns wanted to go to India to study. I was very excited and immediately agreed to it. My friend who agreed to go with me was from the same village and she was from a rich family. Thus, she had no problem in arranging for her travel expenses to India. I, on the other hand, was worried as I had no one to support me though I really wanted to pursue a systematic monastic study programme as well as to help the younger nuns in future. Anim Wangmo gave us some time to prepare but when it was almost time to depart for India, I lost all hope of going as I could not arrange for enough cash to pay for my transportation. Fortunately, Anim Wangmo helped me out. I left Bhutan with my fellow nun friend, her sister and brother-in-law to Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh, North India. The latter two wanted to escort us from Bhutan to the nunnery, since it was our first time going out of India. We waited in Mcleodganj for a week for Anim Wangmo to come and take us to the actual nunnery, i.e. Jamyang Choling Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, located in a small village called Gharoh.

There was no temple or classroom complex in the nunnery when I arrived there. The nunnery only had an old two-storeyed house which was purchased by an American nun along with the land. One room was vacated and used as our prayer hall and the remaining five rooms as the nun's living quarters. There were thirty-five nuns with five to eight nuns to a room. We had no kitchen and used to cook outside with firewood collected from the nunnery land as it was full of jungle. It was especially difficult when it rained as we could not cook and sometimes when half-way cooking, we had to stop when rain came, ending up eating half-cooked rice and vegetables. The food was of poor quality with only rice and *dhall* for lunch and soup for dinner. The place was full of mosquitoes and everyday we encountered water problems. We had to walk two kilometres to carry water for drinking and cooking while for washing we had to go to the nearby rivers or streams on Sundays.

In the nunnery there was no teacher and the founder of the nunnery was an American Tibetan Buddhist nun and she lived in San Diego lecturing in a university. She was the main source for our sustenance and donations as she travels to other parts of the world to raise funds but it was not easy and never enough. The neighbours are all Indian and there is no financial support at all from them or from the Tibetan community in Mcleodganj as the nunnery is far from the Tibetan refugee settlement. The nuns were all new and did not know how to do rituals and practices to go for *shabten* to help people through which income could be generated. In the beginning for two months we were taught how to read and write Tibetan by a nun from Zanskar as we would soon be commencing our Buddhist philosophy studies in the Tibetan language.

After two months of my arrival our new monk teacher came to teach us Tibetan language and grammar. All the nuns started learning from the basic alphabet as most nuns came around the same time although the nunnery was started in 1991. All the nuns used to speak their own language and cling to friends from their own countries, mainly because of communication gap. The common language to most of the nuns was Hindi as the nuns are mostly from the Himalayan region of India, Nepal, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh and Bhutan. Eight months after the Tibetan teacher arrived, another teacher came in to teach us Buddhist Philosophy. By then almost all the nuns could speak a bit of Tibetan language which is the medium of our study and debate. While I was in India for less than two years I studied *Dudra*, *Lekshey Jonwang* and *Sumchupa* together with reading and writing in Tibetan. We also had to learn handwriting from the same Tibetan teacher. We received teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama two to three times a year and the longest teaching used to be during Tibetan Losar, after which we would receive teaching for two weeks to one month after the Monlam Chenmo, the great prayer festival for world peace which lasts for eight days. During these times we would stop our classes and all the nuns including our teachers would attend the *monlam*.

We did not have much to eat and the roof above us sprang a leak in some rooms. The ground floor nuns used to have dust falling on their beds and heads each time someone walks up and down above and whenever there is rain and wind, the first floor nuns would have to run to the ground floor to share a room and bed as the rain water leaked. Yet mentally we were all very happy and most of the time laughing and joking. The study was not difficult then as it was just the beginning of our studies in language, grammar and logic. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to go out of the country to study albeit for a very brief duration. Unfortunately, I had to return to Bhutan in less than two years. I was asked to go for a holiday to visit my aging father and other siblings by the same nun who sponsored my trip to India but she did not tell me that my father had already passed away... almost a year before! If I had known that I would never have returned home before completing my studies. My friend who went with me to India left for Bhutan way before me because of health problems.

Once I was in Bhutan, I learnt with great dismay that I would not be taken back to India to continue my study by Anim Wangmo. I could not return to India on my own because I did not have enough money to make the trip. So I went to Jachung Karmo nunnery in 1995. Here in Jachung Karmo I managed to meet and be under the tutelage of the head nun Lopenma Paldon, learning and practicing Nyungne for the sake of many beings. There were twenty-five nuns at that time and we had to work very hard to survive because the government stipend for each nun was only Rs. 200 per month. We had to bring almost all the things from home and in return we had to go home to work in the fields during harvest and plantation times. Even as nuns, we still ended up working in the fields, providing labour to our families to reciprocate their offerings to the nunnery. We also had to manage the produce from our own nunnery fields, offered to us and tended to by the community. We also had to carry our share of paddy and rice from Thara village as our store house was there. The head nun would not allow us to stay idle without doing any work. If a nun were to fall asleep during prayers even out of tiredness, the elderly Lopenma Paldon would give her a beating with a long bamboo stick that she kept beside her so that she did not have to get up every now and then.

The nunnery collects the harvest from our land and stores in Thara and brings it up to the nunnery when in need because firstly, the journey is tough and steep. Secondly, there is no place in the nunnery to store as there was insufficient space, even for the nuns' quarters. Thirdly, the pounding machines are all in the village and when we need rice from paddy we cannot be carrying it up and down. So when we need rice we take paddy to the machine in the storehouse and then take the processed rice to the nunnery. Sometimes we have to carry paddy back to the nunnery and the nuns have to manually separate the husk using a stone grinder. It takes days to de-husk the rice using the grinder but we had no choice. Four years after I came and joined the nunnery, Lopenma Paldon had a severe bleeding from her mouth one morning and then passed away. It was a tragic event for all of us who were present in the nunnery. Though there were twenty-five nuns in total registered at the nunnery at that time, there were only seven of us at the time of Lopenma Paldon's death. The rest had gone home for some work and others for *shabten* in the villages below. When Lopenma was at her deathbed, she asked the nuns to come to her room and gave us some heart advices, i.e. to be good nuns, practice fasting and nothing else as this is the main practice of our nunnery and this is also the source of compassion to benefit all sentient beings.

After the Lopenma Paldon passed away we had no teacher to guide us and many nuns started to leave the nunnery to find a better place for them to progress in their life and practice. I continued to stay in the nunnery and approached a teacher, Lopen Karma Jungney, in Pang Karpo, a retreat place for monks supported by a government which is about two to three hours walking distance from the nunnery.

This master was kind enough to guide us in our practice and provide shelter and food while we were in his campus to take the teachings and instructions on Ngondro, the preliminary practice. Once the instruction was clear and complete I went back to my nunnery to practice it. Each complete set of Ngondro took about four months to finish. The practice was a set of prostrations, recitation of the Vajrasattva mantra, practice of mandala and Guru Yoga. Each of these practices had to be done one hundred thousand times in four sessions a day. I did another round of it a few years after the first one. My two friends also took the same instruction and we practiced it together but not in a strict retreat as we had no secluded retreat house. We had to do it in our one room confining ourselves the whole day but meeting friends for the meals and after the last session of the day for a short period before we go to bed to discuss the result of their individual practice of the day.

In the nunnery I wake up at 4am and do my personal practices in the morning and after breakfast continue until lunch. After lunch I take a short nap and then continue my practice until dinner time. After dinner I go and join the other nuns to do the protector prayer and *sur* (aroma) offering to clear the obstacles from the unseeing beings. Since I am a senior nun, it is not compulsory for me to join the rest of the nuns for their community prayers of *dolchoe* in the morning and protector prayer in the evening. I join the other nuns when there are special prayers to be done such as emergency prayers for the laity, for the 26 sets of fasting done in memory of the generous donors and the three-day anniversary prayer for the founding Lama. During these prayers we get food from the nunnery and other times we have to cook our own food and find ways to procure food rations with help from home and a stipend of Rs. 200 per month from Dratshang Lhentshog. From the nunnery harvest we keep stock of rice just enough for the prayers for the donors and *Lama'i Kuchoe* and the remaining paddy is sold. With that money, we buy other things for the temple and food groceries like sugar, milk, butter for both eating and lamp offering, and many other prayer items. The basic ritual implements such as drums, trumpet, vajra, bell, water offering bowl, food offering bowl, butterlamp offering cups and pots and pans in the community kitchen for the big festivals and regular prayers were all purchased by our late abbess, Lopenma Paldon. Sometimes we need to upgrade the implements to a better quality though most of the items purchased by our late abbess are made from silver. We also need to procure perishable goods needed during prayers that have to be bought fresh and cannot be stored for long, especially fruit and vegetables, and butter for the thousands of lamps offered almost everyday.

Unlike the other nuns at Jachung Karmo, I consider myself very fortunate because I had no difficulty in finding a good master to give me religious instruction and guidance so that I can practice. The only problem was I had to walk to the teacher's place which is a solid three-hour journey from the nunnery. I used to go for a week or two to receive the instructions and during this period my master would provide me food and shelter nearby in some empty retreat huts. However, I could not stay there for my long-term practice as it is the retreat place for government-sponsored monks under the Dratshang Lhentshog. As for the other senior nuns in Jachung Karmo, it is difficult to get a teacher in the first place.

Life before the nunnery merged with the Sangchen Dorje Lhundrup Shedra (Wolakha nunnery) was good in terms of practice though we did not have a proper teacher to guide us. With whatever I knew and whenever I got an opportunity to get teachings and instruction, I used it for my practice as Jachung Karmo is very conducive for meditation practice—it is not noisy, located in a remote sacred place where there is no disturbance from any kind of human or animal, it is not too hot and not too cold and water is not a problem. With these basic needs I was very happy with my few friends practicing together...until the nuns came under the control of the Wolakha Nunnery. Life after the young nuns from Wolakha came is like hell because we no longer have time to practice as Tshering Yuden and I have to run to the town and villages every now and then to buy groceries and vegetables for the kitchen as we are eating in the community now. It is also because there are so many more people in the nunnery now. In a remote place like Jachung Karmo which is supposed to be the place for a solitary *yogini* or retreat is now polluted with the noise from the young nuns. When we were on our own we did not have to go often as we survived on very simple food and spent more time on practice. Our going out to visit family has been restricted as well otherwise the young nuns will always go home every now and then. The Wolakha Nunnery wants to discipline the young nuns but we senior nuns are punished as well as we can neither go home to visit family members who are very sick nor attend our annual *pūjā*. The Wolakha Nunnery authorities cite the reason that we all have to follow the same holidays but that does not help with our need to visit relatives during times of emergency. They have clipped our wings and robbed us of our freedom.

6.3.2 Life as a Retreater—Tsheten Dema

Having journeyed with Namgay Lhamo throughout her career as a nun, I now turn the pages of Tsheten Dema's life in search of her new-found meaning in life, a story of satisfaction, vindication, spaciousness and peace:

After I joined the nunnery, I was happy to be with the other nuns learning. I finally got a chance to learn the alphabets which now enables me to read prayer texts. I was in the nunnery for three years learning to read and memorize prayers, practicing rites and rituals and all the *mudrās* and making of *torma* etc. before going into retreat for six years. In between the classes and prayers, I did my own study and practice and sometimes rest. Our nunnery's main practice is Guru Dewa, a practice of Guru Rinpoche and we practice it through *tsog* offering and doing visualization meditation on the 10th and 15th day of each lunar month. On the 25th and 30th day of the month we practice Chod Rinchen Threngwa (cutting of the ignorance) also through offering of food and on 30th day of the month we also sometimes practice Singye Tsewa Chod as a change. On the 8th of the month we practice Yoechog (prayer for Buddha Amitabha). We receive oral transmissions and initiations for all these practices from our Rinpoche but the detailed visualization of the deities for these prayers are taught only when we are in the retreat. In the nunnery during general teachings we do not go very deep into the visualization and meditation but more for the ritualistic practice as that is more important to help the people and in return help us for our sustenance.

After that I requested our teacher Tshering Phuntshok, a *gomchen* who is in charge of the nunnery and the nuns to send me for the *losum chusum* (three years' retreat). This same teacher also teaches us everything including reading and recitation of the prayers, making of *tormas*, hand *mudrās* and other prayers to perform for the benefit of people before we had a new grammar teacher, an ex-monk and a student of Rinpoche, who recently came to the nunnery.

Usually the nuns do not get an opportunity to go for the *losum chusum* before they complete all the studies on rites and rituals as well as the responsibility of the discipline master, chanting master, steward, treasurer and etc. but it was an exception for me.

Firstly, I was not so young when I became nun and second I was very hard working and the teacher knows that I will do my practice well in the retreat. Thus, I went for *losum chusum* in the nunnery itself with another nine nun friends but we have a separate and secluded place for retreaters. There cannot be more than ten retreaters or *yoginis* at a time because of space constraint. Our Rinpoche, Gyeltshen Trulku, comes to the nunnery once a year and during his visit he would give the necessary initiations, teachings, instructions and guidance for the retreaters as well as the young nuns. Lay people around the nunnery also come and join the teachings. Rinpoche will put us into retreat after all the necessary teachings and guidance are given and then we have to practice ourselves with the help from either our teacher, the layman practitioner or the Vajra master, a senior nun who completed her nine years' retreat. Before going for the *losum chusum* I learnt to make *tormas*—to be used as an offering in the retreat. I learnt other aspects of the rites and rituals and the hand *mudrās* from fellow retreaters. I did not have much time to learn and practice before the retreat because I had not been in the nunnery for long. Moreover, during my initial years at the nunnery, I had to learn basic rituals and sutras and memorize daily prayers that are used in the nunnery as well as when we go out to the villages for *shabten*. Therefore, most of my time spent in the nunnery in the initial years was used up memorizing the prayers and reading as we have to do lots of reading of the sutras in peoples' houses. The oral transmissions and other important initiations are given by Rinpoche himself whenever he visits the nunnery, which is once or twice a year for two weeks to a month because Rinpoche has to travel to many retreat places in India and Nepal including Bhutan to instruct and guide his students. So in my three years' retreat the main practice was Ngondro (Preliminary practice) which is practiced for seven months: 2 months of prostration along with the recitation of refuge prayer, one month of Bodhicitta prayer recitation, one month of hundred syllable Vajrasattva mantra recitation, one month of *mandala* offering practice, one month of Guru Yoga and one month of *Ngagbum*, recitation of secret mantra. All these practices are done for one hundred thousand times; thus, it takes this many months.

Actually, the future retreaters were also in the process of being trained when we came out of our first set of retreat. For the second three years' retreat, my batchmates and I went to Khabtey Goenpa in Tashigang which is also under the same Rinpoche. We had to move because there wasn't enough place in the nunnery retreat house. Rinpoche plans to build more retreat huts in the future so that the nuns can practice all their nine years' retreat without needing to shift around in search of retreat facilities which disturb our practice. That will really save time, energy and also resources which are needed when moving from one place to another as we have to spend more money on transportation because we have to shift all our belongings including cooking utensils, gas etc. Before going into retreat we have to prepare all the ritual implements and offerings and during the retreat too we have to purchase offerings from the market either with our own money or through sponsorship by the laity. At the end of the retreat we have to do an extensive *tsog* (Skt: *ganacakra*) offering to the deities and our Guru as thanksgiving for the success of our retreat. Therefore, we need money before entering into retreat to be able to complete the retreat well. This is by no means easy as we have no income and no support from family as most of our relatives are poor and cannot afford to help us. At the most they can help to provide us with farm produce such as rice, butter, chillies, cheese and vegetables and that too if the village and house is near the nunnery. If the village is far then the family members can ill afford to visit us and bring along their farm produce as they have no money to pay for transportation.

In the second three years' retreat in Tashigang Khabtey Gonpa, we continued from the preliminary practice in the beginning of the retreat followed by the concentration meditation. In addition to these practices we focused on the practice of *tummo*—the Yoga on Psychic heat (Skt: *cāṇḍāli*), *Gyuma*—Yoga on Illusory Body, *Milam*—Dream Yoga, levitation yoga, *mahāmudrā* meditations, *Yoesel*—Clear Light Yoga, yoga of intermediate rebirth, yoga of whispering lineage, and practices on the Cakrasaṃvara¹ tantra (Tib: *Khorlo Dechog*) (see Table 6.3 for the full retreat curriculum). We had some sponsors to support us for our living during the retreat and Rinpoche also helped us with certain things in addition to the teachings, instructions and guidance during retreat. When our second round of *losum chusum* retreat was completed, we all came back to the nunnery. We received a rousing welcome from the entire community of nuns and laity from the nearby villages followed by a three-day Drupchen celebration. I was truly on cloud nine. I am truly fortunate to have had access to the three-year retreat, not one, but two consecutive *losum chusum*. Though I was a newcomer, I had the opportunity which most nuns could only dream of, to enter into strict retreat and progress in my spiritual practice. I could not ask for more.”

6.4 Level of Empowerment of the Nuns of Jachung Karmo

In the preceding chapter, I mentioned that the main practices of the nuns at Jachung Karmo are the Praises to the Twenty-One Tāras (Tib: *dolchoe*), the protector prayers (Dzongkha: *solkha*) and the *Nyungne* fasting practice dedicated to the 1000-Armed Avalokitēśvara¹³⁴ (Tib: *chenrezig*), the bodhisattva¹³⁵ of Compassion. The *dolchoe* is performed every morning while the *solkha* is performed in the evenings.

Nyungne is a seasonal practice at Jachung Karmo. The nuns perform twenty-six sets of three-day fasting practice in a year, viz. (1-8) eight pairs from the 29th day of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar to the 15th day or full moon day of the first month

¹³⁴ Commonly known to the Chinese as Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy

¹³⁵ A being who commits to achieve enlightenment for all sentient beings

with concluding prayer on the 16th day, (9-16) eight pairs from the 29th day of the third month to the 16th day of the fourth month (Wesak (Dzongkha: *Saka Dawa*) month); (17-18) two pairs from the 1st to 4th day of the sixth month with concluding prayer on 5th day and (19-26) eight pairs from the 29th day of the sixth month to the 15th day of the seventh month with concluding prayer on the 16th day. Fasting practice is also done on special occasions like the descending day of the Lord Buddha, 22nd day of the ninth lunar month, etc. In between if there are sponsors to host and invite the nuns to their houses, the nuns will oblige.

Apart from the congregational morning and evening prayers, the nuns also have their individual practice, often practiced in private. Of the seven senior nuns, Namgay Lhamo said her main practice is *ngondro*, which is a preliminary practice, a pre-requisite to all other practices in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism.¹³⁶ She also does the *Tāra sādhana*¹³⁷ every morning. Lopen Tenzin Dema, the senior-most nun also does deity yoga practices as she has received some instructions from *lamas* when she was with the late abbess, Anim Lopen. The rest of the senior nuns practice certain mantras but have not taken sufficient teachings which can enable them to do their own *sādhana*s. The young nuns from Wolakha did not as yet have any personal practices since they are newcomers to the nunhood.

When gauging the level of empowerment of the nuns in Jachung Karmo, it is important to make a distinction between the two categories of nuns at the nunnery; the first being the seven senior nuns who had been at Jachung Karmo for several years and the second group, the young nuns from the sister-nunnery, Sangchen Dorje Lhundrup Shedra in Wolakha. This study found that all seven senior nuns at Jachung Karmo were well-versed

¹³⁶ Preliminary Practice of Prostrations, Vajrasattva, Mandala and Guru Yoga

¹³⁷ *sādhana*, is the act of reading a liturgical text which forms the core of the deity yoga practice in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. A *sādhana* has two main portions, the generation and completion stage practice. It essentially begins with taking of refuge in the Triple Gem, generating the spirit of enlightenment (Skt: bodhicitta), followed by a seven-limb-prayer and then the generation stage practice which includes visualization, propitiation, worship, adoration of a particular deity (which is Buddha, e.g. Chenrezig or Tāra) and ends with the completion stage practice (formless meditation) and dedication prayers.

in their daily prayers and the workings of the *Nyungne* fasting retreat. These nuns also possess very basic knowledge on rituals such as arranging the altar, preparing the *tormas* and playing of musical instruments which accompany these rituals. I noted in the previous chapter that with a little bit of extra coaching, these nuns can definitely conduct more elaborate rituals on their own, such as the *Lama'i Kuchoe*, which they are still unable to as they have not been given full training since there is no one to train them. The nuns still have to rely on the monks for this annual prayer. The young Wolakha nuns are new to *Nyungne* and have not yet mastered the practice. Moreover, most of these newcomer nuns showed little interest in *Nyungne* and dodged the retreat, thereby reducing their prospects of learning anything from their seniors.

Next, in order to gauge the educational attainments and level of empowerment of the nuns, I employed a questionnaire survey on nuns in both Jachung Karmo and Jashar Goenpa. The study revealed that half the nuns interviewed from Jachung Karmo, mostly the young Wolakha nuns, have been to secular school; the highest until Class VII though the majority did not make it past Class IV. The other half never went to school. One nun who has not been to school in her early age managed to obtain informal education¹³⁸ (adult class) for a few years which she says has helped her tremendously. The nuns who went to school learnt a little English, Dzongkha and other secular subjects. One of the Wolakha nuns has learnt basic first-aid in Wolakha. None of the nuns has any professional skills or working experience.

At Jachung Karmo, the nuns, at the most learn to read and memorize the prayer texts which they use in their daily congregational prayers. Some of them had the opportunity to learn basic implements and musical instruments (see Figure 6.1, p.228) like the *vajra*, bell, drum and etc. Phurpa Lhamo (14 years) says:

After I came to Jachung Karmo I learnt to make *torma* and decorate with Kargay, bell and *vajra* by observing the senior nuns but I learnt hand *mudrā* in Wolakha.

¹³⁸ Is a programme by the Ministry of Education, Bhutan to increase literacy rates amongst adults (men and women) who had no opportunity to attend formal schooling

The sister nunnery of Jachung Karmo, the Wolakha nunnery, which is actually a private nunnery run by the royal family somehow merged with Jachung Karmo, government nunnery. The Wolakha nunnery has two of the three-tier government monastic education programmes, i.e. the *lobdra* and the *shedra*. The nuns study basic literacy and rituals at the *lobdra* first and then proceed to study Buddhist philosophy at the *shedra*. Because they have access to a systematic monastic education with competent teachers, the young nuns from Wolakha are much more empowered than their senior counterparts from Jachung Karmo in most ritual aspects, especially the playing of musical instruments and usage of ritual implements because they are taught well in their nunnery. In fact, it was the Wolakha nuns, six of them, that were playing the musical instruments during the *Nyungne* retreat. The seniors could at best only play the drum and bell.



Figure 6.1: Nuns learning rituals at Jachung Karmo Nunnery¹³⁹

In the frequent absence of the monk teacher at Jachung Karmo, Lopen Tenzin Dema who has been with the nunnery for two decades teaches the junior nuns from Wolakha basic reading and memorisation of texts. The young nuns have already learnt the alphabet, spelling (Tib: *yorlog*), reading (Dzongkha: *tshigdu*), memorization (Tib: *lozin*) of texts, grammar (Tib: *sumtag*) at the *lobdra* in the Wolakha nunnery. According to junior nun Ridam Zangmo, aged fourteen:

I am undergoing training in Wolakha and Jachung Karmo nunnery with the teachers and senior nuns. So far I memorized the prayers of *Lamai Kutey* (Preliminary prayer), *Khemey Kutey* (Lineage prayer), *Namjom*, Praise and prayer to Guru Rinpoche, *Drama*, *Konchoe Chidue*, *Yonjong*, *Neten Chogchoe*, Tea offering, *Phulchoe* and food offering which are the topics to be learnt in class 1 of *Lobdra* (School).

Most of the senior nuns learnt these basics from other institutions; either in India or at secular schools and then taught the others who were not literate. Other than the recitation and memorization of certain prayer texts, the nuns know practically nothing else, except

¹³⁹ Source: Fieldwork (2012)

for Namgay Lhamo who managed to somehow complete her preliminary practice (Tib: *ngondro*) for a few months and Lopen Tenzin Dema, who is by far the most empowered of all the senior nuns in terms of the number of oral transmissions (Tib: *lung*) and initiations (Tib: *wang*) received which endows her to do spiritual practices more effectively:

I had some religious instructions in Jachung Karmo nunnery from Anim Lopen herself. I had Fasting retreat practice (Nyungney) transmission, reading and reciting of the prayers, memorizations of all the important prayers from Anim Lopen. She was very strict with all the nuns and particularly she was even stricter with me. At the age of eight, I received *thri* from a Rinpoche in Paro, initiation from Lama Sonam Zangpo and Rinchen Ter-dzod wang from Khentse Rinpoche in Phuntsholing all with Anim Lopen.

During my interviews with the nuns, it was evident that they are sadly lacking in basic dharma knowledge, i.e. understanding of basic Buddhist doctrines. I observed that their knowledge of Buddhism is piecemeal as these nuns do not have access to a systematic Buddhist education because they neither have qualified teachers nor a structured study programme. Most of the nuns were not aware of the most basic doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path etc. Forget about the Buddhist doctrines, many of the nuns, especially the young ones from Wolakha did not even know what the Triple Gems¹⁴⁰ of Buddhism (Tib: *konchog sum*) are. This is hardly surprising since their monk teacher who was supposed to teach them about the basics of Buddhism and simple rites and rituals was constantly missing from the nunnery. This challenge will be discussed further in the subsequent section. Needless to say, the nuns have little idea about their monastic code of conduct, *Vinaya* as most of them are not ordained or have never been told, not even by their preceptor, about the rules they are supposed to follow as novice nuns (Tib: *getsulma*; Skt: *śramaṇerikā*). Therefore, apart from the preliminary practices, daily prayers and *Nyungne*, the nuns have little knowledge on other aspects of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. Being a government nunnery in the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, it is

¹⁴⁰ The Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings) and the Sangha (the community of monks and nuns)

ironic that these nuns still do not have the opportunity to secure any one of the three-tier religious education¹⁴¹, i.e. *lobdra*, *shedra* and *drubdra* which is freely available to monks in government monasteries in Bhutan and even in the private nunnery in Wolakha.

There are indications that nuns may be staying in the nunnery to learn skills which will enable them to earn a living outside of the nunnery. One of the nuns aspires to learn English, Nepali and other skills like stitching, *thangka* painting, medicine and yoga. Another said that she hoped that the nuns could be taught languages like English and Nepali to enable the nuns to teach dharma in different languages in different Dzongkhags (districts). As such, the Wolakha nunnery has already embarked on several living skills courses for the nuns, as Sonam Chöden, age seventeen, explains:

Nuns should learn English, computer, tailoring, making of statues and stitching of *thangka* to help the people, the country and oneself if any obstacle arises in future. That will at least help us to get food. In Wolakha we have short computer courses taught by monk teacher Nyima but now that he left a graduate girl came to teach the nuns. In between the senior nuns who took the course used to teach the junior nuns. Tailoring is taught to some nuns by a nun who had training from her previous nunnery in Mysore, South India. The nunnery plans to teach cross-stitch, embroidery, making of statues and painting, etc. so that nuns in case they disrobe would be able to sustain on their own and it is also for the future sustenance of the nunnery.

Many of the nuns are actually contented with whatever little knowledge they have, saying that what they learn in the nunnery is more than enough and they do not have to go for any more skills. However, a few nuns expressed their desire to learn Buddhist Philosophy and Tibetan grammar to enhance their understanding of the dharma.

In terms of leadership roles and nunnery management, the nuns have organised themselves according to the typical administration hierarchy found in any Vajrayāna Buddhist monastery or nunnery throughout the Himalayan region (see Table 6.2 p.232). Although the nunnery has a hierarchy beginning with the head of nunnery (Dzongkha: *uzin*), followed by the discipline master (Dzongkha: *kudung*), teachers (Dzongkha:

¹⁴¹ *lobdra*, (schools for entry-level monks), *shedra* (monastic college/institute) and *drubdra* (meditational centres, specifically focusing on retreats). See Chapter Three for detailed explanation.

lopen), secretary (Dzongkha: *drungyig*), steward (Dzongkha: *nyerpa*) and chanting master (Dzongkha: *umze*)—they are inexperienced mainly because they lack training. Zangmo (2009) observed that the nuns at Jachung Karmo were in dire need of “some kind of training in leadership and good management practices, such as simple book keeping or accounting”, an assertion which corresponds to the situation I encountered at the nunnery. Moreover, there is no proper accounting and nunnery management system, something which the nuns require so desperately. I recall the incident narrated in the preceding chapter whereby the teacher could easily take advantage of the nuns’ inexperience in accounts-keeping and poor mathematical skills. Had the nuns been trained to assume such important responsibilities as *drungyig* which doubles as a treasurer, these types of incidences could be averted. Capacity building of the nuns in nunnery management is an often overlooked matter as the nunnery authorities assume that these nuns would somehow learn how to cope on their own. Indeed, all the nuns who hold the above positions had to learn their duties on-the-job. Only one, Namgay Lhamo, has had previous exposure at the Zilukha Nunnery in Thimphu.

Technically, there is no *uzin* since Anim Lopen passed away. The senior-most nun is Lopen Tenzin Dema who had been with Anim Lopen since she was six years old and the longest resident of Jachung Karmo since it was reinstated in 1986. However, she acts only as a junior teacher or *lopen*, reserving senior posts for learned monks. Indeed, there has been a long line of male mostly monk senior teachers in the past. At best, the nuns can only assume assistant teacher positions because they simply lack the capacity due to lost opportunities. Since Jachung Karmo has been subsumed within the Wolakha Nunnery, the *uzin* is none other than the director of the Sangchen Dorji Lhundrup Shedra, i.e. Wolakha Nunnery. Table 6.2 illustrates the hierarchy and roles of nuns in the two nunneries studied.

Table 6.2: Hierarchy and Roles of Nuns in the Nunneries Studied

Jachung Karmo Nunnery	Jashar Goenpa
1. Head of nunnery (Dzongkha: <i>Uzin</i>): None 2. Discipline master (Dzongkha: <i>Kudung</i>) [nun]: Enforces rules and regulations of the nunnery and prepares the duty roster. 3. Teachers (Dzongkha: <i>Lopen</i>): 1 monk and 1 nun 4. Secretary (Dzongkha: <i>Drungyig</i>): Administrative duties and correspondence with stakeholders 5. Steward (Dzongkha: <i>Nyerpa</i>): Takes care of groceries and oversees food preparation in the nunnery. 6. Chanting master (Dzongkha: <i>Umze</i>): Leads daily and special prayers and oversees preparations of prayers. 7. General nuns: Nuns (mostly doing <i>pūjā</i>).	1. Head of nunnery (Dzongkha: <i>Uzin</i>) [nun]: female <i>trulku</i> . 2. Vajra master (Dzongkha: <i>Dorje Lopen</i>) [nun]: ¹⁴² 3. Discipline master (Dzongkha: <i>Kudung</i>) [nun]: Enforces rules and regulations of the nunnery and prepares the duty roster. 4. Teachers (Dzongkha: <i>Lopen</i>): 2 males laypersons (<i>gomchen</i>) and 1 nun 5. Secretary (Dzongkha: <i>Drungyig</i>): Administrative duties and correspondence with stakeholders 6. Steward (Dzongkha: <i>Nyerpa</i>): Takes care of groceries and oversees food preparation in the nunnery. 7. Chanting master (Dzongkha: <i>Umze</i>): Leads daily and special prayers and oversees preparations of prayers. 8. Acting Discipline Master (Dzongkha: <i>Mingnyer</i>): Assumes responsibilities in the absence of the discipline master. 9. General nuns: a. Nuns in the nunnery (studying and doing <i>pūjā</i>); b. Nuns in solitary retreat (Dzongkha: <i>Tshampa</i>)

Source: Fieldwork 2012

Despite the gloomy outcomes from the analysis of the nuns' level of empowerment, one positive aspect is that the nuns at Jachung Karmo have carved a specific niche for themselves in their communities, which is a by-product of their years of diligent and sincere dharma practice. These nuns are much sought-after by the local communities because of their extensive practice of *Nyungne*. The niche is a result of deep appreciation by the local people who prefer the nuns to do the practice on their behalf, compared to monks because of the extreme dedication and sincerity on the part of the nuns.

While Jachung Karmo, the oldest of the three government-run¹⁴³ nunneries in Bhutan is sinking into insignificance especially after its merger with the Wolakha nunnery, a parallel and more optimistic development in monastic education for women in government-supported nunneries has just recently emerged. On 24 November 2013, the Kila Dechen Yangtse *shedra* for nuns, better known as Kila Goenpa, was upgraded to the status of college. The existing *shedra*, located just below Chelela in Paro, Western Bhutan

¹⁴² Leading those in retreat with daily practice (acting on behalf of female *trulku* who is currently in retreat). Conducts ceremonies as the Vajra Master on special days.

¹⁴³ The other two being Kila Goenpa in Paro and the Shedrup Choeling in Sarpang.

has forty-five nuns studying under a strong team of seven teachers including its principal. The nuns' college, re-christened as Kila Dechen Yangtse Higher Buddhist College commenced with fifteen nuns who are studying in their sixth year, allowing them to expand their education until the full nine years programme. The principal was quoted as saying that the ultimate aim of the college is to “allow[ing] them [nuns] to become teachers themselves, and eventually take over the nunnery”.¹⁴⁴ Kila Dechen Yangtse, just like Jachung Karmo, is currently under the Zhung Dratshang and the establishment of the college is seen by its principal Lopen Yonten Gyeltshen as “a first step towards the independence of the nuns” there.¹⁴⁵ It is heartening to note that some of the nuns have taken the government *shedra* exams which make them very much a part of the government *shedra* system. The advantage of the nuns who go through the government *shedra* system is that their qualification will be recognized by the government. Other private-run *shedras* like Pema Choling Institute in Bumthang have not been able to secure such recognition to date.

6.5 Level of Empowerment of the Nuns of Jashar Goenpa

The private-run Jashar Lhundrup Choling or Jashar Goenpa is celebrated in Pema Gatshel as a nunnery of retreaters. As is the general trend in Eastern Bhutan, Jashar Goenpa leans towards the Nyingma school of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism although in recent years, it has adopted some Drukpa Kagyu practices since they began receiving stipend for thirty nuns from the Dratshang Lhenstshog, resulting in a hybrid practice called ‘Ka-Nying’. According to Anim Kunzang Wangmo, 51 years old who has been a nun since she was 10 years old and was a direct disciple of Anim Woesel Chöden, the founder; the nuns at Jashar Goenpa mainly follow the Nyingma tradition but they wear

¹⁴⁴ Kuensel Online. Downloaded on 25 November 2013. <http://www.kuenselonline.com/buddhist-college-for-nuns/>

¹⁴⁵ -ibid-

their robes in the Kagyu style. The nuns do not practice *The Six Yogas of Naropa* because it is Kagyu practice but they focus on *semthri* —a true nature of mind practice.

There are two categories of nuns in the nunnery, firstly, the general nuns who are studying and reciting prayers or *monlam*; and the second, nuns in solitary retreat (Dzongkha: *tshampa*). At the time of my fieldwork, the nuns of Jashar Goenpa had received the oral transmission (Tib: *lung*) of the Guru Dewa practice from their spiritual advisor, Gyeltshen Trulku Rinpoche but were yet to receive the actual instructions for practice (Tib: *thri*). As such, only the *tshampa* nuns had received the *thri* and were practicing Guru Dewa intensively in retreat. Gyeltshen Trulku promised to confer another round of *lung* for Guru Dewa for the benefit of newcomers during his next visit to the nunnery¹⁴⁶.

From my researcher's impressions in Chapter Five and the narratives of Tsheten Dema's life as a *yoginī*, I repeat that the core practice in Jashar Goenpa is the Guru Dewa, practiced twice a month on the 10th and 25th day of the Bhutanese lunar calendar. Guru Dewa is practiced in the form of *tsog* (Skt: *gaṇacakra*) offering. On the 25th day of each month, the nuns practice Rinchen Threngwa and Namchoe Yoechog. The Togden Yoechog is practiced on the 30th of every month. Other than these practices, the nuns perform all the rites and rituals (e.g. *jabzhi*, *mitrugpa* etc.) that are usually performed only by monks or *gomchen*. In a somewhat reversed scenario from other parts of Bhutan; it is the nuns instead of monks who are invited for *shabten* by the laypeople in Pema Gatshel. Apart from the Zilukha Nunnery in Thimphu and perhaps, Garab Rinpoche's nunneries, hardly any other nunnery in Bhutan is summoned to perform complicated prayers such as these. This is probably because the nuns who go out to perform *shabten* comprise nuns who have completed three, six or even nine years in retreat. Therefore, the local

¹⁴⁶ The Rinpoche (male) of Jashar Goenpa does not reside at the nunnery as he is the spiritual director of numerous monasteries and nunneries in Bhutan and India and visits his disciples on a rotation basis to provide spiritual advice.

communities have faith that the nuns are capable of performing the prayers effectively. Another reason could be that Western Bhutan has more monks at the communities' disposal compared with their Eastern counterparts.

The income from these *shabten* is a major source of sustenance for Jashar Goenpa. These highly trained nuns add value to the nunnery which is why as we have seen in the preceding chapter, the nuns from Jashar Goenpa are always out doing *shabten* in one village or another. In contrast, the nuns at Jachung Karmo who are not as highly trained as those in Jashar do not have many opportunities for *shabten*.

Though the nuns are perfectly capable of leading the prayers on their own, they are nonetheless still accompanied by their male *gomchen* teachers to reassure the communities of the efficacy of their prayers. As we have seen in Chapter Four, the Bhutanese, like other Himalayan range Buddhists feel that male practitioners (monks and male *yogīs*) have a greater efficacy than nuns, probably due to the former's higher levels of spiritual and monastic training. As Gutschow (2004:35) observed in the context of Zangskari nuns,

By contrast, nuns are called to perform more mechanical acts of generalized merit making, which have fewer instrumental or pragmatic functions. Monks provide ritual expertise, while nuns offer a general source of merit as well as adult labor.

With regards to their level of education, the majority of the nuns have not been to school (secular) while those who have, dropped out of school without completing the primary level. One nun went to school for only seven days and before class started, she ran back home to her parents. Another nun studied until class X (10)¹⁴⁷. Some nuns said they learnt English for two months from a volunteer teacher from a neighbouring school. Most nuns do not have any professional skills or working experience but one nun said that she is highly skilled in working in the field (agriculture) as she worked until she became a nun at the age of twenty-eight. Other minor forms of capacity building include

¹⁴⁷ Equivalent to Form 5 in Malaysia

nuns' participation in the Healthy Food and First Aid Class conducted by the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation¹⁴⁸ and flower gardening training.

Some nuns bring into the nunnery their secular skills as they ordain later in life.

Khandro Wangmo, twenty-five is the most recent nun at Jashar and shares her work experience:

I went for short teaching training courses and then worked at a non-formal school, teaching basic literacy to adults for ten months in Paro. I also worked with the Lhaki Group of Companies as an accountant for a year. I underwent the Youth Development Fund (YDF) training for three years in Phuntsholing and later on pursued a Hotel Management Course (HMC) for nine months in Mongar.

In terms of religious education, all nuns are receiving education similar to that in a typical *lobdra*. They are being trained in performing prayers and usage of musical instruments along with *torma* making. They learn to read and memorize the Nyingma and Kagyu rites and rituals and hand *mudrās* from their *gomchen* teacher. As with Jachung Karmo, there is a senior nun who helps the junior nuns with basic memorisation of texts. In the past, a male *gomchen* teacher who had been residing at the nunnery for thirteen years taught the nuns alphabet, spelling (Tib: *zorlog*), reading (Dzongkha: *tshigdu*), memorization (Tib: *lozin*) of texts. Just before I commenced my fieldwork at Jashar Goenpa, the nuns commenced their learning of Orthography (Dzongkha: *dayig*) from another *gomchen* teacher, an ex-monk from Trashigang Dzong. According to Samten Zangmo, nineteen:

I learned the alphabet and how to read and I am still continuing with it but at the same time I am learning to recite prayers, to make *torma* and hand *mudrā* and to use musical implements like Bell and Vajra, Drum and etc. Now we have started Dayig (orthography/dictionary) class.

In terms of nunnery management, the nuns have also organised themselves in a similar hierarchy as that of Jachung Karmo, with three additional positions, viz. the head of nunnery, i.e. the *uzin* which is Anim Trulku; the *vajra* master (Dzongkha: *dorje lopen*), Anim Kunzang and the acting discipline master (Dzongkha: *mingnyer*), who assumes

¹⁴⁸ Founded in March 2009 with the aim to improving the basic living standard of nuns in Bhutan, starting from nutrition, shelter, sanitation, medical care and their educational standards.

responsibilities in the absence of the discipline master. These nuns have a better capacity to handle nunnery affairs as they have relatively experienced teachers to guide them on-the-job. Yet, they could benefit from more capacity building in order to reduce total dependence on the teachers. There are two teachers, both senior male *gomchen* teachers and a junior teacher, their very own nun. Overall, the caretaker head of the nunnery is Gyeltshen Trulku, who is overseeing the running of the nunnery until Anim Trulku completes her retreat and assumes the nunnery responsibility.

Like Jachung Karmo, while many nuns are contented with whatever they learn in the nunnery, there are also several nuns who opine that they should learn English, computer, medicine and *shedra* studies to keep up with the globalised world. The nuns say that they needed English skills otherwise they would be left out in formalised national and international settings such as conferences, workshops and health courses. These nuns' main concern is that they would not be able to comprehend new ideas and unable to express their views in such platforms.

Nuns at Jashar Goenpa are far more privileged than their sisters at Jachung Karmo as they have a Rinpoche who oversees their spiritual progress in a systematic manner while the nuns at Jachung Karmo remain spiritually static. The nuns at Jashar Goenpa receive initiations (Dzongkha: *wang*) and oral transmissions (Dzongkha: *lung*) from their Rinpoche whenever he visits them. Some nuns have undergone the six-year retreat under the guidance of their Rinpoche, which is a major spiritual accomplishment in Vajrayāna Buddhism (see Table 6.3, p.240 for the retreat curriculum) and a remarkable breakthrough in the Bhutanese religious landscape. Furthermore, Gyeltshen Trulku Rinpoche has much foresight in building the capacity of the nuns and is perceived by the nuns and the lay communities as genuinely interested in empowering the nuns in all aspects of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan. Rinpoche, has, for the first time in the history of the nunnery and Bhutan and probably even in Tibet, trained and encouraged

the nuns to perform the masked and ritual dances (Tib: *cham*) in public during the Drupchen conducted once in three years—traditionally performed by monks or laymen. This is a welcome sign of breaking down of centuries of gender barriers in religious practice in Bhutan. There is ongoing training for the Jashar nuns on Kuntuzangpo'i Cham by monks from the Pema Gatshel Dzong. The Jashar nuns have certainly progressed far better than their Himalayan region counterparts, such as the Zangskari nuns who are “rarely taught the most spectacular Tantric rites like *maṇḍala* making or sacred dance” (Gutschow, 2004: 207), which is indeed a breakthrough. As Tsheten Dema shares,

Rinpoche told us nuns that we have to be able to perform everything in the nunnery by ourselves. Thus, he also plans to make Anim Trulku complete her nine years' retreat soon and take over the nunnery. Rinpoche wants her to be capable enough to run the nunnery on her own without Rinpoche and other male leaders. The Drupchen was organized by the two batches of nuns who completed their three and six years' retreat with the help of the nuns in the nunnery. Rinpoche was present there as well to witness the grand celebration and historic event.

Anim Trulku, the incarnated nun's spiritual training was well underway during my fieldwork. Their *lama*, Trulku Gyeltshen aspires that Anim Trulku reassumes her previous incarnation, Anim Woesel Chöden's responsibility of the nunnery in all aspects of nunnery management, viz. education, practices, sustenance etc. Rinpoche plans to bestow the entire range of teachings and initiations that he received in their lineage stemming from Togden Shakya Shri to empower the young female *trulku* to grant such initiations to her fellow nuns. Some of these teachings such as the *Six Yogas of Naropa* are not at all given to nuns in this era though there were nuns who received it and practiced it in the past and even achieved high realizations which are purportedly much deeper and more rapidly than male practitioners.

In terms of basic and experiential Buddhist knowledge, many of the nuns are qualified to teach dharma, perform religious rituals and other related religious activities because at least ten have completed the minimum three-year retreats. For those who have not been to retreat, they feel that they are not sufficiently empowered to teach for the time-being but are fairly optimistic that they would be able to in the next decade or so. This is because

these nuns would eventually be sent for retreats. Moreover, they have heard that plans for setting up a *shedra* are currently in the pipeline and within a couple of years they would have access to a full-fledged monastic, i.e. *shedra* education. It is unclear as to what the curriculum would be as Jashar Goenpa is not under Dratshang Lhentshog, and is thus, not obliged to follow the Drukpa Kagyu *shedra* curriculum. The nuns added that they do not teach dharma to the laity as they have not been trained and those who went for the six years retreat have not been granted permission by their Rinpoche to teach. However the nuns perform religious rituals for the local communities, both in the nunnery and in laity's houses.

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Table 6.3: Retreat Syllabus at Jashar Goenpa

No	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	5th Year	6th Year	7th-12th Year
1	<i>Purvaka</i> :- Preliminary Practices.	<i>Purvaka</i> :- Preliminary Practices.	Refreshing Preliminary Practice	Preliminary Candaliyoga:- Yoga of Psychic Heat	End of the Levitation Yoga	End of the Mayakayayoga	Completion of Actualization Practices. Mastered Mahāmudrā Meditation
2	<i>Pitra</i> :- Method aspects of practice.	<i>Aksobhaya</i> :- Buddha practice	Guru Practice (Ladrup)	Preliminary Mayakayayoga:- Yoga of Illusory Body	Continuation of Candaliyoga	End of the Svapanayoga	
3	<i>Matra</i> :- Wisdom aspects of Practice	<i>Red Rudra</i> :- Dragmar practice	Continuation of Mahāmudrā Meditations	Preliminary Svapanayoga:- Yoga of Dreams	Intermediate Mayakayayoga	End of the Prabhasvarayoga	
4	<i>Karnatantra Mamcara</i> :- The whispered lineage consciousness transference practice.	Continuation of Mahāmudrā Meditations	-	Preliminary Levitation Yoga	Intermediate Svapanayoga	Exclusive Turn Yoga with Levitation Yoga	
5	Mahāmudrā Meditations	-	-	Continuation of Mahāmudrā Meditations	Prabhasvarayoga:- Yoga of clear light	Cakrasaṃvara tantra practice	
6	-	-	-	-	Initiation of AnTārabhavayoga:- Yoga of intermeditate rebirth	Continue Candaliyoga	
7	-	-	-	-	Karnatantra Yoga :- Yoga of Whispered lineage	Continuation of Mahāmudrā Meditations	
8	-	-	-	-	Samarasaniti:- Transmission of equal taste	-	
9	-	-	-	-	Continuation of Mahāmudrā Meditations	-	

Source: Teaching course of Jashar Woong Goenpa

In summary, the nuns at Jashar Goenpa have access to the *lobdra* and *drubdra* level of religious training in Bhutan. This is an interesting phenomenon because according to the usual monastic education system in Bhutan and even in Tibet, one will have to complete *lobdra* followed by at least nine years's of *shedra* before one is finally admitted into a *drubdra* where one can choose to remain in retreat for life, if one so wishes. If the *shedra* commences as planned, then Jashar Goenpa would become the first nunnery in Bhutan to have the complete three-tier system of monastic education. Jashar Goenpa's achievement in monastic training thus far is largely due to the patronage of Trulku Gyeltshen with funding sourced from outside of Bhutan. Certainly, the establishment of private-run *shedras* for nuns is being seen in other parts of Bhutan as well. For example, the Pema Choling Institute in Bumthang has successfully produced nun graduates from the nine-year *shedra* programme, under the tutelage of His Eminence, Gangteng¹⁴⁹ Trulku Rinpoche. Pema Choling is the first nunnery institute in Bhutan which offers the traditional nine-year curriculum of Buddhist Philosophy spanning the elementary to Master's degree level to women. The nunnery is hugely popular with Bhutanese women aspiring monastic education, with about 150 nuns between the ages of sixteen to thirty. The avant-garde Gangteng Trulku Rinpoche who revolutionised monastic education for women in Bhutan in an immensely patriarchal religious landscape justified the need for breaching so-called traditions inhibiting women's access to religious education in the following stirring quote:

Women who study can bring benefit to the country of Bhutan and serve sentient beings everywhere. Legally, nuns and lay women in Bhutan have equal rights. But because of traditional habits, women do not have much education. Because of this, they are less courageous and suffer from a lack of self-esteem. Although women seem to be stronger than men, a lack of education equals a lack of resolve. A courageous approach is necessary. Study and teachings will allow them to look directly at life, without hesitation

Gangteng Tulku Rinpoche¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Gangteng Tulku Rinpoche, ninth body incarnation of the Pema Lingpa lineage and a very highly revered *lama* in Bhutan

¹⁵⁰ Education and Empowerment for the Women of Bhutan. Pema Choling Institute. By Christine Arpita

The first batch of eight nuns who graduated in 2011 has assumed teaching roles to students in the lower classes. One of them is a former resident of Jachung Karmo who left the nunnery immediately after Anim Lopenma passed away in 1999.

These graduates are regarded as the first home-grown women qualified to teach Buddhist studies in Bhutan. However, these graduates may not be recognized as such because they are not under the Dratshang Lhentshog and did not follow the government *shedra* system. Pema Choling, like Jashar Goenpa, sources its funding from international charities in Europe, the United States, and Canada.

Other private-run *shedras* in Bhutan are the Kunga Rabten Nunnery in Trongsa, which is a nunnery in the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism and Sisina Nunnery, established by Rabjam Rinpoche, a heart-disciple of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the late guru to the royal family of Bhutan, belonging to the Nyingmapa tradition. Whether graduates from Jashar Goenpa and the other nunnery institutes in Bhutan will be recognised by the Bhutanese monastic body remains a question mark though.

6.6 Challenges to Attaining Education, Initiations and Religious

Instructions

Based on the level of empowerment of the nuns in the two nunneries studied, it is evident that the government-run Jachung Karmo Nunnery had many more challenges in terms of access to religious education, initiations and religious instructions for spiritual practice than Jashar Goenpa. The most pertinent issue concerning the nuns' education in the nunnery is the lack of qualified teachers. This finding in a rural nunnery in Bhutan corresponds to Gutschow's assertion that rural nunneries in Zangskar "have a hard time recruiting advanced teachers" (Gutschow, 2004: 35).

The dearth of teachers has been a persistent problem since Anim Lopenma passed away in 1999. In fact, even Anim Lopenma guarded her knowledge and practiced it

secretly without ever imparting knowledge of the Six Yogas of Naropa. Anim Lopenma only emphasised on the *Nyungne* fasting practice and little else. It is puzzling as to why Anim Lopenma taught the nuns very little because unlike Gutschow's (2004:35) research subjects, i.e. the Zangskari nuns who were deemed "unfit to transmit the [*Vajrayoginī*] teachings because of their inferior Tantric training", Lopenma was a well-acclaimed adept in the Six Yogas of Naropa, the pinnacle of tantric training in the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. Therefore, Lopenma was perfectly qualified to transmit her tantric realizations to her nuns, which for reasons best known to her, she chose not to. Tenzin Dema, the senior-most nun who had been with Anim Lopenma since she was five years old, bemoans the lost opportunity:

Though Anim Lopenma was a very learned and advanced practitioner, even having practiced meditation at charnel grounds¹⁵¹, the nuns were not taught anything other than to read, recite and practice *Nyungne*. She was outstanding in the practice of Naro Choedruk¹⁵² under her master Lama Sonam Zangpo in Hongtso Tashigang, Thimphu district and also under her master Drupthob Tsem Kelzang. Eight nuns were given the transmission including Anim Lopenma Paldon and his monk students. Anim Lopenma was the best of them all. Regretably, Anim Lopenma practiced it in secret and never shared her knowledge with any of the nuns.

Despite not transmitting anything more than *Nyungne*, Anim Lopen's nuns faithfully stayed by her, basking in her charisma and radiance. Regrettably but not surprisingly, many nuns left the nunnery after her demise because they could not get qualified teachers to teach them. When Zangmo (2009) conducted a cross-sectional study on the teaching and learning system at Jachung Karmo in 2008, she still found that the nuns had great difficulty in procuring qualified teachers. Though the situation improved slightly during my fieldwork in 2012, the quality of the teacher was questionable. A general selection criteria for teachers, according to Zangmo (2009) is based on "how much one knows and not by certificates or degrees as in structured or formal education systems." If this were the case, then the young monk teacher sent to Jachung Karmo did not qualify in either category because he was not even half-way through his monastic studies. Yet he had been

¹⁵¹ Practicing in charnel grounds is not for the faint-hearted. Moreover, such practices are reserved for advanced *yogis* and *yoginis*.

¹⁵² The Six Yogas of Naropa

sent as a teacher and ended up giving the nuns a raw deal. As described in Chapter Five; not only was the teacher incompetent since he could not take charge of duties such as leading dedication prayers, he was playing truant most of the time. Previous teachers also found it hard to stay on in the nunnery. Zangmo (2009) also observed that the only monk teacher the nuns had was on leave during her field research at this nunnery.

Even if the nunnery manages to secure a teacher, it is unable to retain them; as Namgay Lhamo shares,

We had one old monk teacher after our abbess passed away. This teacher taught us rites and rituals for a few years but due to his old age and the remoteness of the nunnery, i.e. far from hospitals and his relatives, he could not stay long. After that we did not have a teacher for eight years. When we somehow get teachers and ask for instructions, they agree to help but when the time comes to teach, they always come up with some excuse or another as to not give the teachings and instructions saying that they are busy, they have to go somewhere for urgent matters, they are not in the next day or they are not satisfied with the amount the nuns have pledged to offer to them. Thus, we are often left in a lurch by these teachers. The nuns do not receive any instruction and initiations and without these, we cannot practice.

Based on the above assertion and my personal observations, I contend that there are more complexities involved in getting and retaining good teachers than mere distance. Citing remoteness, inaccessibility and busyness are merely tactful excuses to conceal the underlying reasons which are in actuality, either incompetent remuneration because the nuns can ill afford to pay high salaries or simply, lack of prestige. This is in direct violation of the Bhikkhu *Vinaya*, i.e. monastic code of conduct for fully ordained monks (Skt: *bhikṣu*), where *bhikṣus* “should not give the teaching desiring worldly benefits such as receiving homage” (Sujato, 2009: 57). However, many of the monks in Bhutan are not *bhikṣus*, but either *śramaṇera* (novice monks) or are just in the robes without having taken any ordination. This itself is a problem when it comes to streamlining monks’ conduct in the country. It is obvious that many choose not to become *bhikṣus* because of the numerous restrictions, yet, they are still referred to as ‘*gelong*’, an umbrella term for all monks which in Tibetan/Dzongkha actually means ‘*bhikṣu*’. This is the primary reason why I did not use the term ‘*gelong*’ but just used the wider term ‘monks’ to refer to male renunciants and ‘nuns’ to refer to female renunciants in Bhutan.

Based on my casual interviews with several monk teachers, they confided in me that they prefer to teach at established monastic institutions than nunneries. This factor corresponds with Havnenik (1990:119) findings that “nunneries were unimportant religious institutions and teaching there did not offer much prestige”.¹⁵³ It is ironic that even after six centuries, the situation that the Jachung Karmo nuns are in is remarkably similar to the nuns during the time of Dorji Lingpa who were incidentally also from Punakha:

He [Dorji Lingpa] continued his journey down to Changyul at the confluence of the Phochu and Mochu rivers in the Punakha valley where he met a certain number of nuns who asked him to give religious instructions (*dampa*), and he felt very sorry for them since they did not know much about Buddhism. (Karmay, 2000: 4)

Jachung Karmo, since its merger with the Wolakha nunnery has been instituted as the retreat wing of the now mother nunnery at Wolakha. The senior nuns complained that this merger was done without their free, prior and informed consent. Nonetheless, since Jachung Karmo has now been designated as a retreat centre, the resident nuns should at least be given access to qualified teachers who can instruct them in their spiritual practice which is essential if one were to practice in a retreat. Although a teacher had been appointed, it was more to serve the eighteen Wolakha nuns than to benefit the existing seven senior nuns. As it turned out, the young monk teacher left when the Wolakha nuns left Jachung Karmo for their own nunnery in late 2012. Since then, there has been no teacher. Without a qualified teacher, it is next to impossible to practice—comparable to the blind leading the blind since the nuns can only rely on each other.

Another challenge the nuns at Jachung Karmo face is that they do not have access to the systematic monastic education or *shedra* offered to monks in Bhutan. To categorise Jachung Karmo as a *lobdra* is incorrect to say the least as the nuns do not have a structured

¹⁵³ cited in (Falk M. L., 2010, p. 224)

study curriculum¹⁵⁴ and no opportunities to take government exams that correspond to the *lobdra* level. Zangmo (2009) assertion that the “lessons taught were loosely-organized basic reading and writing. Their primary focus was also prayers” still holds true, as we have seen in Chapter Five. Zangmo added that the nuns were taught prayers by rote memorization, an activity that the nuns do each day of the year, which was still the case during my fieldwork. This and the learning of some ritual aspects described earlier in this chapter seem to form the core of the learning of the nuns, and nothing else.

Since Jachung Karmo is a remote nunnery, ideal for meditation practice—used by great meditators such as the founder, Lama Ngawang Pekar; his sister, the first abbess and then later, Anim Lopenma Paldon; it should at the very least function as a *drubdra*. However, because the nuns do not have a qualified teacher to teach the stages of meditation as per the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, specifically the *Six Yogas of Naropa* which is the curriculum for the retreat, then it cannot be categorised as a *drubdra* either. Thus, this so-called retreat wing of the Wolakha nunnery is by mere designation only, because in reality, it is non-functional.

In conclusion, Jachung Karmo, being a government-supported nunnery, does not fit into any of the three types of monastic establishments readily available to monks in Bhutan—*lobdra*, (schools for entry-level monks), *shedra* (monastic college/institute) and *drubdra* (meditational centres, specifically focusing on retreats). Jachung Karmo’s situation is similar to the situation in Buddhist countries like Thailand whereby “the teaching for female ascetics is not as well organized and systematized as that for monks” (Falk M. L., 2010: 224).

However, since the Sangchen Dorji Lhundrup Shedra in Wolakha, Punakha merged with Jachung Karmo in 2012, the nuns from Jachung Karmo who wish to have a

¹⁵⁴ Comprising the full range of the following subjects: Alphabet (Dzongkha: Ka Ku), Spelling (Dzongkha: *gorlog*), Reading (Dzongkha: *tshigdu*), Memorization (Dzongkha: *chorjang*) of the prayer text and ritual, Grammar (Dzongkha: *sumtag*), Prosody (Dzongkha: *nyen-ngag*) and Literary Science (Dzongkha: *rigney*)

systematic monastic education at the Wolakha nunnery can do so if they want to. But, they must reside at the Wolakha nunnery since classes are held there. I must add that the Wolakha *shedra* is a private entity and whether the government will recognise the graduates from this nunnery, is left to be seen. Only two of the seven nuns took up this offer but one of them returned to Jachung Karmo not long after, purportedly because the strict rules and nunnery politics was a culture shock for her. Moreover, she was used to living in a retreat environment since she became nun. Two other nuns, in their twenties, though interested in monastic studies, did not cite any reason for not going to the *shedra* at Wolakha, although there is a high probability that the reasons are similar to the nun that dropped out. Three other nuns were not interested in *shedra* citing age as a factor because many are above 40 years of age. According to Namgay Lhamo,

After a few months in Jachung Karmo, the young nuns from Wolakha went back to their nunnery so that they can start their class. Two younger senior nuns from Jachung Karmo followed suit except for four of us who decided to stay back to practice because we felt it was too late to study due to our age.

Of the various types of religious instructions in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, initiations (Tib: *wang*) are extremely important. Without this transmission, one is unable to practice any of the deity yoga techniques in the tradition. Hence, Vajrayāna practitioners throughout the Himalayan world and all over the globe scramble to receive initiations from qualified *lamas*. Although in some countries such as Malaysia and Singapore whose devotees have the financial means to invite high *lamas* to confer such initiations quite frequently, access to *wang* in Bhutan is rare, especially if it is from high *lamas* like the Je Khenpo, Namkhai Nyingpo etc. Namgay Lhamo laments that the senior nuns at Jachung Karmo were discriminated by the Wolakha nunnery authorities which prohibited them from attending the Je Khenpo's *Cakrasamvara* teaching cum initiations held from mid December 2012 to early January 2013, just outside the Punakha Dzong:

Not long after, the Wolakha nuns returned to their nunnery, there was a public teaching by His Holiness the Je Khenpo and we were supposed to attend it but at the last minute, they [the Wolakha nunnery authorities] asked the nuns from Jachung Karmo to stay back in the nunnery and not to come as we had to take care of the nunnery. It was unfair that we had to stay but all the other

Wolakha nuns could go. We were very unhappy about this but managed to voice our grievance and successfully convinced the teachers to allow us to attend the teachings and initiations.

Of the seven senior nuns during my fieldwork, only three stayed on in the nunnery, joined later by another two nuns from Wolakha nunnery who wanted to do retreat at Jachung Karmo. This is in stark contrast with the high number of nuns staying at the nunnery in 2008 when Zangmo did her fieldwork. In less than five years, the number of nuns at Jachung Karmo dwindled rapidly from twenty-five to three. According to Namgay Lhamo, in a follow-up visit to Bhutan in 2014, the nuns left the nunnery because of two main reasons, firstly, the persistent lack of qualified teachers for the nuns and secondly, the domination/interference by the Wolakha nunnery authorities in the affairs of the original group of senior nuns at Jachung Karmo. The following narrative provides some idea about how these two factors drove the nuns away from the nunnery:

One fine day the nuns discussed about wanting to find a new teacher for the nunnery to guide them in their practice. They all agreed on a specific monk whom some of the nuns had known for years. Besides, he is also related to one *lama* they all hold in high esteem. Accordingly, Tshering Yuden and I were tasked by the nuns to visit His Holiness the Je Khenpo to request for this teacher. When we met His Holiness in his chamber, he said,

I will see if I can find one but if you have anyone in mind you can tell me and we can appoint him.

We could not mention the name of the teacher we had in mind because we were not sure if he would agree since we had not discussed with him first. The Je Khenpo then dropped a bombshell on us,

Actually, your nunnery (Jachung Karmo) has now been combined with the new nunnery of Wolakha [Sangchen Dorji Lhundrup Shedra], which is founded by the father of the four queens of the Fourth King. They might have already thought or have a teacher for you all.

Hearing this we were shocked because we were not informed of this news. Neither Tshering Yuden nor I was aware of this. We did not tell His Holiness but kept quiet and later returned to the nunnery to share the news with the nuns. Not long after that we had a messenger from Wolakha nunnery saying that seven nuns will come soon to stay at Jachung Karmo, followed by around twenty nuns. We were ordered to prepare food and accommodation for these nuns as well as a few accompanying monk teachers and some lay people. The seven nuns came as expected with the principle of the Wolakha nunnery and another young monk. We were told that the young monk would be coming back with the remaining nuns as our new teacher. By evening the teachers went back leaving behind the seven young nuns, aged twelve to seventeen. The nuns were quite excited and seemed happy to be in the nunnery far from town. After a week, another batch of eleven young nuns arrived from Wolakha.

When all the eighteen nuns had finally settled in the nunnery, the young monk teacher was promptly despatched by the principle of the Wolakha nunnery who is also a monk himself and an ex-Dorji Lopen of the Monastic Body. The teacher's job description was to teach the nuns reading, writing and conducting simple rites and rituals. Yet, the teacher himself is young and inexperienced, only twenty-three years old. According to the nuns, he only completed four of the nine years of monastic studies. Worse still, he is not willing to stay in the nunnery. He has been out most of the time rather than in the nunnery and each time he goes, he takes two or three nuns with him. To fill his continuous gap, one of the senior nuns had to take his responsibility to teach the new nuns to read and to make them memorize the daily prayers while the other nuns who had a bit of training on the rites and rituals, *mudrās* and musical instruments were helping to teach the newcomers.

The nuns have their daily study time tables but it is rarely adhered to since the teacher is practically never in the nunnery. Some young nuns who are close to the teacher refused to obey the senior nuns to the extent that they do not come to the morning and evening prayers and they refuse to take their turn in cooking, cleaning and other nunnery chores. It was already causing schism in the community as now there are two camps, the senior nuns versus junior nuns, i.e. nuns from Jachung Karmo nunnery versus the Wolakha nuns. Some young nuns would understand us [seniors] but most did not understand as they were too young and very new in the nunnery and nunhood. Others were just ignorant and misled by their teacher.

Jashar goenpa, on the other hand, still has challenges, although far less than Jachung Karmo. For one, since there is no *shedra* as yet, the nuns face some difficulty in terms of understanding the deeper meaning of the prayers texts that they recite, as Tshering Chukyi, 26 says:

Now we learn Dayig from our *gomchen* teacherand our constraint is in understanding the meanings [of the text].

Another challenge for the nuns' monastic education in Jashar Goenpa is the need to balance the need to serve their communities which ensures the nunnery's sustenance with *shedra* classes. The incessant *shabten* trips as we have seen in the previous chapter are no doubt crucial training ground for the nuns to serve their communities as well as benefiting the communities. Yet, it does not augur well with the need to have complete focus on classes, which is essential if one were to succeed in any meaningful study activity at the future *shedra*.

6.7 Nuns' Contribution to Local Communities and Confidence Levels

From my narrative in Chapter Five, it is evident that both the Jachung Karmo and Jashar Goenpa nuns are contributing to their communities through prayers, reading of Buddhist texts or *sutras*, performing minor rituals and retreats. The nuns organise themselves in groups to serve their communities when they are in need of prayers for the sick, deceased and clearing of obstacles. The senior nuns at Jachung Karmo can go out of the nunnery to serve their communities but the junior nuns from the sister nunnery in Wolakha are not allowed to leave the nunnery, even in a group. Thus, these junior nuns are unable to help the people at all. The nuns at Jashar Goenpa are very actively involved in helping their communities as they very frequently go out for *shabten*.

Apart from helping through prayers, the nuns have to sometimes help their communities in cash and kind as well. Some nuns like Sonam Chöden from the Wolakha

nunnery, who has been trained in first aid administers simple medication to the nuns and local people and checks their blood pressure and temperature. Dawa Dema, senior nun of Jachung Karmo adds:

We sometimes help them [the local communities] to make wicks and donate oil for butter lamps and we have to ask our other fellow nuns to perform prayers for our friends, family and neighbours with our own pocket money.

I asked the nuns in both nunneries if they think they are doing enough for their communities and the majority answered in the affirmative. Dawa Dema added,

We're doing enough because when requested for prayers, we oblige. When the need arises, we accompany the family of the sick and deceased to the hospital, home and even to the charnel ground and for extra prayers we request all other friends that we know to help out.

Kinley Zangmo, 25 said that she is sure that the nuns' contribution to local people through prayers are benefitting the communities who often have difficulty finding *samgha* or *gomchen* to recite prayers and perform rituals when they are really in need. Lopen Tenzin Dema on the other hand, is not entirely sure whether the nuns are actually benefitting the people since they have limited knowledge in the dharma and rituals—as she confides in me somewhat uncomfortably:

Sometimes I feel guilty because when we perform prayers for the people, we don't know how to visualize [the deities] properly but we eat and take the offerings that people offer. It is difficult to refuse them because it is our responsibility to help; when we go to one, all start to invite us.

The Jashar Goenpa nuns' views on this matter also resonate with the majority of the Jachung Karmo sisters, as Khandro Wangmo, 25, explains:

It definitely is benefitting them because they invite us every now and then. Otherwise they will not invite us.

From the perspective of the monks interviewed in this study, the nuns are doing enough for the people in terms of performing prayers and rituals but when it comes to teaching the nuns are really lacking because they do not get equal opportunity as monks to study. Kinley Tobgay, 25, Tango Shedra agrees:

Yes, as they help to do prayers and observe retreats to dedicate it to the deceased.

Yonten Thinley, Namdroling Monastery, South India:

When I look at the performance of both monks and nuns in prayers, then they are benefiting. When it comes to teaching dharma, then I feel the nuns are really lacking as they have little knowledge. To help the society we have to have a *shedra* for the younger nuns so that they can learn and when they grow up they will be able to help the people.

One monk expressed the need for nuns to be more socially engaged in helping the younger generation in terms of education and instilling good moral values in children, especially those from poor and broken families.

If the nuns can help those children of poor family, single parents, and etc. to take care and give them good care, education and better upbringing of the children.

Most of the laypersons interviewed in this study opine that the nuns are useful in society and are doing enough for the people because they are immediately available to perform prayers when there is an urgent request by the laity. Tshering Gyalsten, 43, a layman of this village who at the time of interview was a contractor in the nunnery said,

It makes a great difference having nuns in the temple. In Jachung Karmo, we did not have nuns for almost 15 years in the past. We had to hire a temple caretaker. Now that we have nuns, they take care of the temple and help people and themselves. We can go and ask for their help to do prayers and rituals during sickness, death and other obstacles. We also receive advice such as dos and don'ts regarding tobacco chewing and alcohol drinking.

The laypeople assert that nuns are especially beneficial to the local communities because it is difficult to get *samgha* to perform prayers for the sick, deceased etc. nowadays, especially for the poor and marginalised members of the community, Singye Dorji, a 49 year old man of the village also a retired monk that knows the late Abess of the nunnery said:

The problem of the society is lack of *samgha* to perform prayers and rituals. To help nuns should practice their fasting retreat and recite prayers during the need of sickness, death, dying and marriages and that too for the poor people who cannot afford to donate much.

However, some still say that the nuns could do more to benefit society, i.e. to be more socially engaged such as teaching the dharma and giving counseling, especially to women

facing many social/psychological problems associated with modern living. According to Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, 63 years old, a former cabinet minister I interviewed said,

Bhutanese nuns should spend enough time with other members of society especially the womenfolk who can better relate to nuns than monks.

For this to be possible, Lyonpo gave the following suggestion:

The number of nuns need to be increased – enough to be accessible/available to those who need their services.

In terms of self-confidence, the senior nuns at Jachung Karmo nuns are comfortable performing prayers, but only in a group. However, they lack the confidence when asked to conduct prayers individually, a request some of them get from their natal homes when they go back for a visit. Phurba Lhamo said:

I do not feel comfortable as I am still learning and do not yet have the confidence to perform prayers on my own.

Dawa Dema also said:

I do not utilize my knowledge even if I get invitation sometimes from neighbours in the village. My sister scolds me and grumbles, saying it is no use having a nun at home because I don't go out to help people. I do not go because firstly, I have to help my sister since I depend on her for my food. Secondly, I am shy to go to people's houses.

From the perspective of the laypersons connected to the two nunneries studied, I found that most prefer nuns to conduct prayers as nuns are easily accessible in terms of distance and kindness in accepting invitations from the laity. Housewife Thinley Lhamo, 35 years says,

I prefer nuns to monks as they really look unique with robes on and the devotion to *samgha* grows when I see nuns and I really feel very proud and contented to see them doing all religious practices as monks do. My friends and I always tell the nuns that our lives are wasted pursuing samsaric activities and you all should learn and practice well to be able to help many beings.

6.7.1 Confidence Levels in Teaching the dharma and Performing Rituals

The nuns at both Jachung Karmo and Jashar Goenpa have thus far not been requested by the local communities to teach dharma, hence, any discussion on this subject is purely hypothetical, except for Lopen Tenzin Dema, the junior teacher of Jachung Karmo. She

was the only nun teacher during my fieldwork in both nunneries. Since Anim Lopenma's demise, Lopen Tenzin Dema has tried to fill the gap by teaching her young nuns. She was deemed capable enough to teach some aspects of religious studies that she was sent by Anim Lopenma to Kila Goenpa¹⁵⁵ in Paro to teach but encountered some personal obstacles:

I was there for a week teaching *namjom* and *drama* but my mom was not well and I had to come back home.

During my focus group interviews with the nuns at Jachung Karmo, I found that there were conflicting opinions amongst the nuns on their ability to teach dharma to the local communities. Phurba Lhamo, 14 says,

I do not feel that women, including nuns, are qualified to teach and perform rituals because monks and men in general, are in many ways, much more capable.

This apprehension stems directly from the general condition of the nuns who are not well-trained in religious education. Nevertheless, most nuns echo Kinley Wangmo's assertion that if the nuns have equal opportunities and are diligent in their studies, they would most certainly be able to teach in future.

Yes, we can and many nuns are qualified since it all depends on our mind. If we can study, practice and train properly, we definitely can do as much as monks can do.

Despite her optimism of women's innate ability to grasp the dharma and excel in religious education, Kinley, 16 is concerned that androcentric cultural norms fuelled by patriarchal values that transmission of religious ideas is a male prerogative would ultimately dictate whether females are accepted as teachers in their own right:

I think we will have constraints while teaching like it would not look good in the eyes of others as we are female.

¹⁵⁵ which now has a nuns' college

Kinley Zangmo, 25 and Lopen Tenzin Dema, both senior nuns are also perturbed by public opinion, which I suspect, is caused by inferiority complex. They cited this as a factor which hinders women like them from teaching:

I worry that people speak ill about nuns teaching the dharma when there are sufficient learned monks to teach.

People ask and invite us to read and recite sutras and prayers like Tára, Nyungney, etc. We oblige but do not teach them dharma as I worry that people might say bad things like “being a woman she is trying to teach us”.

Sonam Chöden, 17, is quick to intervene and insists that this situation came about not because of women’s intrinsic deficiency or due to local culture which frowns upon women teachers, but because women have never been empowered through education to be sufficiently capable of teaching.

I think women and nuns don’t do things that monks do because nuns do not learn all that monks learn. The reason is that nuns are not equipped with all the knowledge that monks are taught and another reason is that nun’s education began only recently.

Dawa Dema, 25, a senior nun also disagrees with the assumption that the so-called injunction against women teaching religion in Bhutan is attributed to cultural norms, citing exceptions when local communities request nuns to teach or perform rituals. However, upon closer scrutiny, it seems that the laity is left without much choice as they are unable to get monks to do the job:

I feel that nuns should teach and perform rituals because some nuns are qualified. But there are some nuns who do not teach even if they are asked to, saying that we are not supposed to teach and that people do not follow nuns. From my observation I think it is not entirely true. There are people who are good and say that nuns are better and we might have to rely on them [the nuns] more than monks because some monks chase after higher status and rich people’s houses to perform prayers and rituals to get better offerings at the end of the day.

The nuns at Jashar are in complete agreement with their Western Bhutanese sisters, and believe in the capability of women teaching the dharma. However, a few nuns, due to lack of self-confidence felt that they would not be upto to the task, as Pema Wangmo, 34 years old nun:

Yes, I feel that women, including nuns are qualified and should teach dharma and perform rites and rituals but not me.

The idea that nuns have equal potential as men to perform any tasks is partly reinforced through capacity building training organised by the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation (BNF). Namgay Lhamo, who attended one such motivational talk in Paro in 2011 expresses full confidence in the ability of the nuns to teach, and I quote:

I feel that nuns are qualified and can teach. When we went to the nuns' meeting, we were told by the Home minister that nuns and women in general are qualified and can do all the activities which laymen and monks can do. He told us that if we have the qualification to support us, we would be employed in any field or department in the civil service.

In Jashar Goenpa, this idea is instilled and consistently reinforced by their male guru, Gyeltshen Trulku which prompted the nuns to ponder and realise on their own after years of encouragement. Tsheten Dema, 39 years old:

Rinpoche always tell us that nuns can teach and should teach and I also feel it is very true. So far I haven't heard of any nun in Pema Gatsel teaching other nuns and lay people. I don't think any constraint will be faced by the nuns to teach dharma as people will be proud saying that the nuns are doing well without cheating others.

From the monks' perspective, all of those interviewed said that Bhutanese nuns should and are capable of teaching dharma and performing religious rituals as there is no difference between the genders in helping sentient beings:

In Buddhism we have *shepa*¹⁵⁶ and *drupa*¹⁵⁷. For the nuns I think *shepa*'s way would be more beneficial because in *drupa* we have to go to the mountains to practice. In *shepa* we say that women are better in communicating their ideas compared to men. If the nuns have sound knowledge in Buddhism, then they will definitely benefit beings tremendously.

Moreover, the monks do not think that the nuns of today face any constraints in contributing their knowledge and ritual expertise to society though they agreed that the nuns did face constraint in the past as people did not accept nuns. From the monks' point of view, the nuns are well accepted in performing the rituals as well as teaching as long as they are capable.

In addition, the teachers at Jashar Goenpa opine that the nuns must have a sufficient monastic education to benefit the people, suggesting that the nuns should at the very least

¹⁵⁶ Emphasis on Buddhist philosophical studies

¹⁵⁷ Emphasis on meditation practice, i.e. experiential Buddhism

learn Rigney Chewa Nga¹⁵⁸ and Chungwa Nga¹⁵⁹ to become fully-qualified teachers. As far as the laypeople interviewed in this study are concerned, nuns should and are capable of teaching dharma, performing rituals and other dharma activities. Thinley Lhamo, 35 years:

Nuns should give teachings and good advice to the laity. Otherwise, of what use are they?

Lobsang Choeje, 42 years:

The nuns have the opportunity to teach but they have to be bold to help others.

Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, 63 years:

Yes definitely, with their wisdom, simplicity, compassion, endurance, persuasiveness and other similar superior qualities, they could be even better than many monks as dharma practitioners and teachers.

Nuns should and are capable of helping people. Even laymen and women are given equal rights in everything by our fourth King. There is no one who is not capable. The people simply conclude by saying that nuns are not capable before giving responsibility. One's capability depends on the individual. We have to examine by giving them responsibility.

6.7.2 Perceptions on Equal Positions and Roles in the Religious Sphere

When I asked the nuns at Jachung Karmo if they should hold equal positions or perform equal roles as monks, the majority of the twelve nuns interviewed on different occasions replied in the affirmative. Dekyi, 17 years:

Yes, nuns should hold equal position as monks because now Wolakha and Kila nunnery have *shedra* started with equal rights as monks.

Thinley Wangmo, 17 years:

Nuns should hold equal position as monks because we all learn the same studies and the government also provided us equal rights to study.

Kinley Wangmo, 16 years:

Yes. The nuns are only now beginning to get equal opportunities so we do not as yet have nuns holding the same position as monks but the nuns will soon catch up with the monks since they are getting the same education and training as monks.

¹⁵⁸ Five major sciences (five major fields of study) viz. arts and crafts, medicine, grammar, logic and philosophy

¹⁵⁹ Five minor sciences (five minor fields of study) viz. poetry, synonyms, lexicography, astrology and dance and drama

The majority of the sixteen nuns interviewed at Jashar Goenpa affirm that nuns should assume equal positions as monks in the religious sphere, yet at the same time, they acknowledge that this is not the case for Bhutanese nuns because monks and laity are still prejudiced towards the nuns. Samten Zangmo, 19 years:

Yes, nuns should hold equal position but the monks and people are not giving the opportunity to nuns.

Others use the charming comparison of androgyny to justify equality for all *samgha* as both monks and nuns do not differ in their appearance. Karma Zangmo, 33 years:

Absolutely, nuns should hold equal position because we are all wearing the same robes and have the same function in society.

Nonetheless, there are nuns in Jachung Karmo who subscribe to the view of biological essentialism—that men and women have specific gendered roles in society because of limitations of the female body. This view emphasises male strength and female impurity, i.e. menstruation (Dzongkha: *me-tsangwa*) which these young nuns see as a hindrance in achieving gender equality. Ridam Zangmo, 14 years:

Men are much better in many ways like performing rituals and going out for work.

Phurba Lhamo, 14 years:

I don't think we should hold the same position as monks because we have many hindrances.

Views based on biological essentialism are a reflection of Western Bhutanese social norms and cultural beliefs which stem from a long pre-Buddhist tradition of preoccupations with the dichotomy of purity versus impurity. Men are exalted because of their strength and purity and females reviled because of their inherent impurity and frail demeanour. Women are supposedly weak in terms of carrying out religious duties, yet, it

is women who are left to tend to the fields and household chores as most men migrate to the cities in search of wage labour!

Though Buddhism has been in Bhutan for at least one thousand two hundred years, little has changed in terms of how society views the worth of women. It is baffling that Buddhism which largely espouses gender equality has paradoxically through its own clergy perpetuated such androcentric ideas which have deprived women of their place in religion and their worth as equal human beings. Nima Dolma, 15 years:

I do not think nuns should hold equal position as monks because monks are nine times greater and higher than women. Moreover, women have to take five hundred rebirths to be reborn as male.

Another common myth prevailing in Bhutanese society pertaining to gendered roles in religious practice is the widespread belief that women should not conduct the *Lamai'* *kuchoe* (death anniversary prayers for high *lamas*) and *choku* (annual prayers). This idea was regurgitated by the young nuns when I interviewed them about practices that cannot be conducted by women. Phurba Lhamo, 14 years:

Kuchoe is a special prayer and ritual practice that cannot be performed by women.

Nima Dolma, 15 years:

Ritual practiced only by men is the *choku* practice.

The senior nuns promptly rebutted this view, Lopen Tenzin Dema, strongly asserting that:

All dharma and rituals can be practiced by both sexes. The only reason that the nuns cannot and do not perform these rituals is because of the lack of qualified teachers to teach the nuns. If we are given equal opportunity, nuns can do even better than monks.

Dawa Dema added:

Certain rituals are performed by men not because nuns and women are not allowed but it is because nuns are not given equal rights in education. If nuns are given equal opportunity then there is no such dharma and rituals that nuns cannot perform which only men can.

The senior nuns, who have some knowledge of the dharma, seem to appreciate that there is no such injunction etched in stone which delimits the role of nuns in religious practice. They know that any restriction placed on the nuns is solely because the male clergy have neglected building the capacity of the nuns over the last millenia. This gross neglect, as Gross (1993) and Gutschow (2004) suspect is linked to a contest for resources, which we will visit in the upcoming section. Such dubious prohibitions have seriously repressed the Jachung Karmo nuns' role in religious practice who like their Zangskari counterparts are confined to "make[ing] merit on a smaller, individual scale through upholding their discipline, reading texts, prostrations, circumambulation, and fasting" (Gutschow, 2004: 165).

In a rare and surprisingly progressive point of view from one member of the local community, Tshering Gyalsten, 43 actually recommends that nuns learn to perform these 'forbidden' rituals to build their capacity and help the local communities:

The only thing that nuns have to learn now to fully help themselves and the local people is to perform *kuchoe/choku*.

The Jashar Goenpa nuns have a different version of what can and cannot be practiced by nuns. They opine that other than the Six Yogas of Naropa which is a core Highest Yoga Tantra practice, the nuns are free to practice and perform other types of prayers, including the *kuchoe* and *choku*. These nuns are referring to the practice of *tummo* (Skt: *cāṇḍāli*), the yoga of inner heat which monks refuse to teach the nuns because the nuns would have to practice without clothes. The nuns cite that female teachers are rare and hence, women cannot practice under male teachers due to cultural sensitivities. This is indeed odd because Anim Lopenma Paldon was a nun and she learnt *tummo* (Skt: *cāṇḍāli*) about five decades ago from a male teacher!

I contend that even if nuns receive adequate religious training, there are still subjected to subtle gender discrimination as there are traces of prejudice against women within the local communities. In the context of Jashar Goenpa, although their nuns are highly trained

in experiential Buddhism, the society feels comfortable only when male *gomchen* lead the *shabten*. This demonstrates that somewhere in the deepest depths of the psyche of the Bhutanese people, androcentric impulses whose roots lie in the dichotomy of purity-impurity are still being transmitted—a result of a fundamentally dualistic mind which the Buddhist teachings seek to eradicate. Hence, as Gutschow (2004: 119) aptly surmised, “...the innate purity of the monk seems as important as his advanced ritual training”. In the case of Bhutan, monks aside, even the *gomchens* have a higher status than nuns and are more desirable in terms of teaching the communities and conducting rituals. Because nuns are female, the fault lies not in their training, but in their bodies!

I conclude that as long as androcentric values still persist within the Buddhist clergy, both male and female, achieving gender parity in religious practice would be a distant goal. It is only when clergy like Gyeltshen Trulku and Gangteng Trulku take affirmative action to encourage their nuns of their innate capabilities, build their capacities through education and demonstrate their equal abilities to the local communities, e.g. through performing *drubchen* and complicated rituals, will centuries old cultural norms shaped by patriachal barriers begin to collapse. This will give Bhutanese women the equal opportunities they have always aspired for in religious practice. The Jashar nuns have begun to break these barriers.

6.8 Difficulties and Exploitation in the Nunneries

Once Jachung Karmo merged with Wolakha nunnery, the senior nuns’ workload and expenditure increased leaps and bounds. According to the senior nuns,

We used to cook our own meals but from the day the young nuns came we had to start a community kitchen, take turns to cook, and take extra responsibility to get ration and vegetables and etc. For that reason we were asked to pay Nu. 605 each month from a total of Nu. 1705 from Dratshang Lhentshog for our food.

Despite having some stipend from Dratshang Lhentshog, the nuns still face financial constraints. After deducting Nu 605 for food, nuns are left with only Nu 1100 per month as pocket money to buy other necessities. As an added means of sustenance, some have to provide labour at their natal homes in exchange for farm produce which they bring back to the nunnery, a phenomenon also observed in the Zangskari nuns in Gutschow's (2004) study. Dawa Dema tells us what happens when she goes home:

When we go home, they only ask to help to take care of the children, clean houses, wash dishes, and look after the animals.

The main challenge which is directly linked to the nuns' sustenance is the remoteness of the nunneries. The nearest village is a good three-hour walk from Jachung Karmo, hence it is difficult for people to reach the nunnery and make offerings. This is not a problem in Jashar Goenpa because the nunnery is easily accessible by motor vehicles. The remoteness of Jachung Karmo poses other problems as well, as already narrated in Chapter Five. Lopen Tenzin Dema summarises the general difficulties plaguing the nuns at Jachung Karmo:

The biggest challenge we face is the lack of road access to the nunnery. We have to carry all our groceries either by horse or ourselves. Besides, there is no proper housing, kitchen and toilet. Water is a big problem too because in summer the rain water washes away all the drainage and pipe and in winter, the water turns into ice and snow and does not flow through the pipes. At night it is very dangerous without electricity being a woman to access the outdoor toilet.

Other minor constraints the nuns face at Jachung Karmo and its sister nunnery is the lack of medical care due the remoteness of the nunnery. Sonam Chöden, 17 years who has some first aid training is the only link the nuns have to any medical care. She cites the following constraint:

When the nuns are not well I have to check their temperature and blood etc. and when the need arises to give medicine I don't have it. The reason is that the main site, Wolakha is far and there is nobody to bring the medicines up.

At Jashar Goenpa, the main challenge is the lack of retreat huts for practitioners due to space constraints. Therefore, Tsheten Dema and her batch-mates who had completed

six-year retreat could not extend their retreat to nine years to give a chance to the new batch of retreaters. The nuns had to instead take over the official duties of the nunnery, as explained earlier in this chapter. Tsheten Dema shares her difficulties,

While in the nunnery I am unable to practice what I have done in the retreat because we have no time. The five retreaters were all appointed as nunnery officials and we have so much of responsibility to run around for the nunnery as well as the young nuns. Being a steward, I have to run to the market every two to three days to get the groceries and I have to run errands in the nunnery as it is my department to take care of the food for all including the reception of guests in the nunnery.

From my observations, the problems that the Jachung Karmo nuns face today is largely due to the absence of any exit strategy for the nuns upon the demise of their abbess, Anim Lopenma. Although there was no exit strategy in place at Jashar by Anim Woesel Chöden either, at least the disciples managed to request Trulku Gyeltshen Rinpoche to take over the nunnery management, which turned out to be a blessing for the nuns. In the case of Jachung Karmo, the nunnery is remote and the nuns had no support structure. In contrast, Jashar had a community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who could support each other. The Jachung Karmo nuns were left to fend for themselves with dire consequences, as Lopen Tenzin Dema recalls:

After Lopenma's demise we had a tough time because we were ignorant of how to handle and run the nunnery. We did not have a teacher for eight years and the people who used to help collect our share cheated. Even the people ploughing our land refused to give proper share to the nuns. Many nuns left the nunnery in search of studies and teachers.

At other times, nuns are exploited on the basis of their poor educational attainments. I once again recall the incident narrated in Chapter Five whereby the monk teacher at Jachung Karmo was misusing the nunnery funds and blamed the nuns to cover up his misdeeds. Namgay Lhamo explains,

Whenever the *nyerpa* and I present our monthly accounts, it is very transparent and clear because we do not mix the nunnery money and our personal cash while buying things. Yet the moment we hand over the accounts to our teacher he always finds fault with our calculation. The teacher has been taking advantage of our poor mathematics by making us pay from our own pockets to account for the so-called shortage. We did not argue much as it was always a minor sum of Nu.300 to 500. However, whenever we hand over the cash to him to buy things for the nunnery, he does not give us an account of the money, not even a single receipt. When questioned, he would become angry and defensive. The last straw was when he accused us of misappropriating Nu.100, 000 and demanded that we pay for it!

In addition, nuns also face the threat of physical violence from their teachers. Tshering Yuden of Jachung Karmo shares her story of how she and Namgay Lhamo were almost whipped after wrongly being accused of breaking the nunnery rules:

In mid January 2013, the *drunyg* and I requested for three weeks' leave to go for an international conference on Buddhist women in India as our sponsor had invited us. The teachers refused to give us leave but after explaining that it was an educational tour and conference for our capacity building and exposure, they accepted our application. Once back in the nunnery, the teachers assembled all the nuns in the prayer hall and summoned the both of us to the front just after the evening protector deity prayer. Standing in front of the entire assembly of nuns, the head teacher took out a leather whip and said we will be whipped for not abiding by nunnery rules—leaving the nunnery without permission. We were shocked and explained that it was they who had given us permission to attend the conference and that it was for educational purposes, not to waste time. We were released because all the other nuns pleaded on our behalf. It was a great humiliation for us because we are senior nuns yet we were disgraced in front of all the junior nuns for no reason.

Not long after this incident, both Namgay Lhamo and Tshering Yuden left Jachung Karmo due to repeated disturbances from the nunnery authorities forcing the nuns to work to rebuild the nunnery, depriving them of their practice time. The nuns were made to oversee the food and drinks for the construction workers and to take care of the nunnery. Moreover, from being an autonomous entity, the Jachung Karmo nuns were now under the full control of the Wolakha nunnery, run by monks. Monks in positions of authority have taken it upon themselves to censure and control the senior nuns into submission.

The senior nuns during my fieldwork reported that the annual rice harvest promised by the five villages that had been supporting the Jachung Karmo nunnery for more than five decades was usurped by the Wolakha nunnery. Immediately after the merger, the Wolakha nunnery sent some army personnel¹⁶⁰ to collect the rice harvest. None of the harvest—meant only for Jachung Karmo nunnery through a traditional pact between the late Anim Lopenma and the villagers was disbursed to Jachung Karmo that year. By the time the senior nuns at Jachung Karmo found out, the rice had been fully consumed by the Wolakha nuns—not even a single grain was left. The nuns were indignant yet they kept quiet because they are now controlled by the Wolakha nunnery. If they complain,

¹⁶⁰ Some royal armies linked to the nunnery

they would be scolded or punished. The harvest has for years been used only for the 26 sets of *Nyungne* and the *Lama'i Kuchoe* prayers and the rest sold to get the necessary cash to manage the nunnery. The senior nuns said that they never consumed a single grain for themselves all these years. Not only was the harvest taken, the sister nunnery was coveting Jachung Karmo's musical instruments which are of excellent quality and had on the pretext of fine-tuning the instruments, tried several times to take these instruments back to Wolakha. There were lingering doubts amongst the senior nuns and even the local communities that the merger of the two nunneries was an economic strategy to usurp the resources of the once rich Jachung Karmo nunnery. It became apparent that the sister nunnery sent the eighteen nuns up to Jachung Karmo only to benefit from the monthly stipend¹⁶¹. One senior nun explained:

Twenty five nuns including the nun teacher used to receive the monthly stipend but the nun teacher's share was later channeled to the monk teacher who never taught us even a single day. His stipend is the highest, Nu.3700 per month.

The nuns at Jachung Karmo had come under total submission and their lives made difficult so that they would eventually leave the nunnery. That is exactly what happened less than a year after I concluded my fieldwork. Namgay Lhamo shares about life after leaving Jachung Karmo, which turned out to be equally difficult, if not, worse:

We were tortured both physically and mentally in different ways and eventually, five¹⁶² of us left the nunnery. In our new place, a group of laypeople had pledged to build us seven retreat huts as they already have the village temple not very far from Jachung Karmo which was close to our teacher as well. While waiting for our retreat huts to be constructed, we lived in the temple building sharing the rooms for seven months. When the retreat huts were not forthcoming, we inquired from our supporters who told us that they were asked by Dratshang Lhentshog not to build retreat huts for the nuns and not to help us as well because nuns cannot stay and practice close to the monks' retreat place and the nuns cannot be at a higher spot from the village as it is a bad sign for the villagers. From every angle, we are the targets of either the laypeople or the monks.

Whether it was an excuse by the villagers or an order from the monastic body, it is clear that nuns in Bhutan find it hard to survive on their own outside their nunneries. Nuns

¹⁶¹ The total quota for Jachung Karmo's monthly stipend remains at 25 nuns. Since only three senior nuns are left at Jachung Karmo, the remaining stipend for 22 nuns is now channelled to the Wolakha nunnery.

¹⁶² Three from Jachung Karmo and two from Wolakha

still lack retreat facilities, a gap which Dratshang Lhentshog is yet to address. It is not necessary that every nun lives in a nunnery as many wish to enter into retreat and need a decent place for that purpose. Although Jachung Karmo is ideal in terms of location, the actual conditions at the nunnery are far from conducive for spiritual practice as nuns neither have the time nor peace of mind to practice. Namgay Lhamo continues,

All five of us had to disperse in different directions to find a suitable place to practice. Two nuns went to Lungten Wangmo's hut between Jachung Karmo and Punakha. Her hut could only accommodate one nun so the second nun could not go for retreat. The second one ended up helping her host in the construction of her uncle's monastery. Another was forced to return to her village home with her parents and siblings, having to perform chores in return for shelter and food with no time for spiritual practice. Tshering Yuden and I were quite lucky to have found two small huts for ourselves from an old friend in an old nun's community though we had quite a bit of renovation to do before we could use it for our retreat. The roofs were leaking, the place drenched and moist, without a bathroom or toilet. We had to construct one because while in retreat we cannot go out as we are not allowed to meet people or talk to them. We had to repair the water source and pipes to ensure adequate water supply for the entire duration of our retreat.

Since both Namgay Lhamo and Tshering Yuden did not have enough money¹⁶³ to construct the toilet and bathroom and for their own daily sustenance, they had to resort to *shabten* for the much needed income. However, this earned the ire of their hosts:

The problem women face is never ending as the owner of the retreat huts who let us stay there was not happy with us going for *shabten* since we were supposed to be in retreat. For that reason, they sold off the retreat huts to another person without our knowledge, after we had almost completed the renovation works! People never understand our situation and difficulties and think we can just sit and meditate without food and drink but we are still human and we need basic requisites such as food and shelter to protect us from the harsh winter and wet summer. In the past, monastics could live under trees in the forest as they went for almsround and there was no harm and danger from humans, which is not the case today. From all directions we feel that we are suffering just because we are female.

While still on the subject of sustenance, the nuns at Jashar Goenpa had for months not received their monthly stipend from Dratshang Lhentshog. A monk who was entrusted by the nuns to deliver the monthly stipend for the thirty nuns (out of fifty nuns) had not disbursed a total of one year's stipend to them. At the time of my fieldwork, each nun's stipend was Nu.1705 per month totalling Nu 613,800 per year. Each time the nuns call on him to enquire; he would always cite some excuse. The stipend is important to the

¹⁶³ Now that they have left Jachung Karmo, they are no longer entitled to the monthly stipend from Dratshang Lhentshog.

nunnery because a portion of it is deducted for all the nuns and teachers' meals since the income from the *shabten* is insufficient to cover the cost of food and management of the nunnery. The nuns do not seem to have a channel to voice their grievances to Dratshang Lhentshog nor does the monastic body have a fool-proof system to ensure that the *samgha* receives their share. The nuns, not wanting to jeopardize their relationship with the monk, remain quiet.

6.9 The Systematic Deprivation: Ordination, Education and Recognition

Ordaining into the monastic life is a basic right that the Buddha bestowed on his male and female disciples in order to be able to practice the dharma without the distractions of laylife. Yet, "Ordination remains one of the most jealously guarded privileges within Buddhism" (Gutschow, 2004:169). The Buddha initiated the fourfold *samgha*, i.e. *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇī*, laymen and laywomen, which the Seventeenth Karmapa, the present head of the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism likened to 'the four pillars in a house'¹⁶⁴. Since the *bhikṣuṇī* order is not extant in the tradition, the Karmapa asserted that "the Tibetan house of Buddha's teachings was missing an important condition needed to remain stable" (Damcho, 2012). Yet, nuns in many Buddhist countries are denied access to *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, including nuns in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition.

I mentioned in Chapter Two of this thesis that the *bhikṣuṇī* order purportedly never reached Tibet. Since the issue of the introduction or rather, the revival of the *bhikṣuṇī* order in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism is the subject of ongoing debate, I included this dimension in my study as ordination status is very much related to nuns' empowerment. As a recap, there are three¹⁶⁵ levels of ordination for Buddhist women, in the following

¹⁶⁴ The Karmapa explains that according to the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lamrim) text by Lama Tsongkhapa, from the very definition of a precious human rebirth, the presence of *Bhikṣuṇī* is needed for a land to be considered a 'central land'. Whether a place is a 'central land' or not depends on the presence of the fourfold assembly.

¹⁶⁵ Male renunciants or monks only have two, *śramaṇera* (novice monk) and *bhikṣu* (fully-ordained monk). Laymen are known as *upāsaka* (Tib: *genyenpa*)

ascending order: *śramaṇerikā* (novice nun), *śikṣamāṇā* (2 year-probationary nun) and the highest, *bhikṣuṇī* (fully-ordained nun). At present, only the *śramaṇerikā* ordination is available to women in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism.

I asked the nuns if they would want to go for full ordination if the tradition allows it, and to my surprise, found out that the more important question at hand was if the nuns at the two nunneries studied were even ordained at all! To my utter disbelief, most of the young nuns at Jachung Karmo were not ordained. This was true for some of the nuns at Jashar Goenpa. Most are not *śramaṇerikā* (Tib: *getsulma*) but have taken only the lay refuge vows (Tib: *genyen dompa*), known as *upāsikā* (Tib: *genyenma*). Although the *getsulma* vows (novice nun) are available in tradition, it is disquieting to see that most nuns are mere *genyenma*. In Theravāda Buddhist countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka, since they did not have access to *bhikṣuṇī* ordination until recently¹⁶⁶, the nuns formed a parallel order of female renunciants called *maechee* or *dasa silamata* respectively, i.e. nuns who hold ten¹⁶⁷ precepts (Barthololomeusz, 1992; Falk M. L., 2010). These women in the two nunneries studied did not even have access to *śramaṇerikā* ordination. Worse still, some of the nuns did not even take the refuge¹⁶⁸ vows and have just donned themselves in maroon robes. Thus, many nuns in Bhutan are in actuality, no different from laypeople, as Dawa Dema shares,

I have not even taken the lay precepts other than refuge vows. In the future if I get the opportunity, I hope to go for the highest ordination because if we do not take ordination then we are no different than laypeople.

I found this true in the case of monks as well. Therefore, to speak of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is a level far beyond the grasp of my research subjects during my fieldwork. Nonetheless, I did try to gauge the receptivity of the nuns in the two nunneries studied

¹⁶⁶ The order has since been revived in Sri Lanka and Thailand but these new *bhikṣuṇīs* are not recognised by their respective governments as such

¹⁶⁷ The *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī* Vinaya are a derivative of the basic ten precepts

¹⁶⁸ Taking refuge in the Triple Gem of Buddhism, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

about full ordination, considering their current ordination status was also shaky. The study revealed that the majority of the nuns at Jachung Karmo felt that ordination is a necessity and if possible, they should take *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Thus, if given the opportunity, most nuns at Jachung Karmo expressed the desire to go for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. When I posed the question on the importance of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, most nuns said that higher ordination is very important because the merits accrued from being a *bhikṣuṇī* is higher than *śramaṇerikā* and far higher than laypersons since *bhikṣuṇīs* observe 346¹⁶⁹ precepts, *śramaṇerikā*, 36 precepts and laypersons, five precepts. Therefore, merits commensurate with the number of precepts observed by a spiritual practitioner, the benefits of which accrue in this and future lives, according to Namgay Lhamo:

Full ordination is important because it will benefit both this life and the next life. If given a chance I want to go for higher ordination.

Lopen Tenzin Dema added that one's ability to benefit sentient beings also depends on the number of precepts one is able to keep.

I received my getsulma (*śramaṇerikā*) ordination from Thrulshig Rinpoche in Paro and if I am given the opportunity, I would go for higher ordination as the benefit will be much higher.

The nuns also told me that the higher the number of precepts, the better as one would then keep one's conduct in check. Ordination, which is defined by precepts, as the nuns understand it are a constant reminder of one's vows taken and makes one a better practitioner. Without any ordination vows, there is no incentive to observe proper conduct. As Kinley Zangmo explains,

I hope to get ordained as it is important because with the vows we can practice well and we will be more careful with the vows to practice better and sincerely.

Sonam Choedron agrees:

¹⁶⁹ The Bhikṣuṇī Patimokkha of the Six Schools. Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc. Translated by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh Ph.D. Web site: www.buddhanet.net

Yes, ordination is very important for our sincere practice and to develop better with our precepts which otherwise may do all sorts of actions against dharma.

Nuns who do not support the need for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination are in actuality, sceptical of the ability of the nuns to keep the more than three hundred precepts. Kinley Wangmo opines that monks are better at keeping precepts than nuns:

No, I don't think nuns should go for higher ordination because most nuns are fickle-minded and they cannot keep the precepts as monks. From my observation very, very few nuns can keep precepts.

Most nuns at Jashar Goenpa feel that *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is important. Many expressed interest in becoming *bhikṣuṇīs* and hope that *bhikṣuṇī* ordination can be organised in Bhutan in the near future. Samten Zangmo, 19 years:

Yes, because it will help our practice. I took refuge vows only and I hope to get ordained in future.

Nonetheless, though supportive of higher ordination, some feel insecure as they are still young and anything might happen to them, a concern expressed by Tashi Gyalmo, 19:

I should go for the ordination but much later as I am scared of the obstacles as I am still very young.

Karma Zangmo opines that it is not necessary to become a *bhikṣuṇī* as one can still practice the dharma well without ordination:

Ordination is important but I feel that if we can follow vows without ordination also is good enough.

This assertion is echoed by many Thai *maechees*, i.e. the ten precept nuns who are contented with the status quo and do not wish to become *bhikṣuṇīs* (Falk M. L., 2010).

It is noteworthy that one nun, Pema Wangmo, linked the importance of being a *bhikṣuṇī* to the safety and self-respect of the nuns, a dimension I will discuss in the last section of this chapter:

I have *getsulma* ordination from Je Khenpo Trulku Jigme Choedrak. If I am given an opportunity I will go for *gelongma (bhikṣuṇī)* ordination because it will benefit self and others more and people also will feel guilty to play with our precepts. If someone organizes the higher ordination we will go to receive it.

I also interviewed some monks to gauge their opinion about giving Bhutanese nuns access to *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. The monks interviewed are generally supportive of women receiving full ordination in Bhutan. The rationale for the support is that receiving higher ordination makes a big difference in our practice since without precepts; nuns and monks would be no different than laypeople. Ugyen Dorji, a 39 years old monk of Yongla Goenpa:

Nuns should go for ordination because ordination is very important as it makes a big difference [in terms of the amount of merits acquired] in any action we perform.

Kinley Tobgay, 25 years old monk of Tango Shedra interviewed agreed:

It is very important to take the higher ordination because without the vows we are no different than laypeople.

Yet some assert that the nuns would not be able to keep all the 347 precepts, hence, the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is not relevant in the modern context. Yonten Thinley, a monk who studied in India thinks:

I think it will be difficult to follow or keep the more than three hundred vows at this time of the era. Hence, it is not so important to take higher ordination.

6.9.1 The *Bhikṣuṇī* Ordination Debate in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism

It is interesting that the monks should view *bhikṣuṇī* ordination as less important than *bhikṣu* ordination. Since the function of both these categories of fully-ordained saṃgha is the same, then why is one *saṃgha* more important than the other? This brings to mind the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination scenario in Thailand whereby senior Thai monks view full-ordination of women as ‘unnecessary’, craftily using the teachings of non-self/formlessness (Skt: *anātman*) to justify denying women their right to full-ordination as bestowed by the Buddha himself:

If Chatsumarn¹⁷⁰ had any knowledge of dhamma practice and spiritual liberation, she would have known that ordination is unnecessary. Everyone is equal in practicing dhamma. Forms are not necessary. What matters is the mind' (Ekachai 2001b cited in (Falk M. L., 2010, 240)

The above statement reveals some typical displays of institutional androcentricism, commonly found in declarations made by the patriarchal *bhikṣu saṃgha* to suppress women's rights to religious practice. Firstly, monks think that they are more knowledgeable than women in all matters related to religion and cling to this as a universal truth. Second, they are selective in the aspect of teachings that suit their agenda. In the statement above, the senior monk used the egalitarian teachings of Buddhism to justify his oppression, saying that dharma practice is equal for both genders. This is the pinnacle of all ironies as his preceding statement repudiated *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, yet, he spoke callously about gender equality.

Indeed, some of the monks I interviewed in this study and many more that I have met throughout my monastic career spanning over two decades—especially senior monks and even learned Geshes have disavowed *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, saying that the lineage never reached Tibet¹⁷¹, hence it can never be introduced in Tibetan *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. One Bhutanese *bhikṣu* says,

It is not that there is no higher ordination but in the *Vajrayāna* tradition it is said that the lineage never reached Tibet. We have many high *lamas* and none of these *lamas* has said that the nuns have to go for higher ordination. When I look at this then I feel it is not important to go for higher ordination. If it is really important *lamas* will do something.

The above statement is a typical and often repeated rhetoric pertaining to the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination debate in Tibetan *Vajrayāna* Buddhism which fits perfectly in the category of institutional androcentricism. Firstly, there are parallels between the worldview of the Bhutanese and Thai *bhikṣus*, i.e. *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Examining their assertions

¹⁷⁰ Prof. Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh or Venerable Dr. Dhammananda is a Thai bhikkhuni, highly learned Thai scholar and lecturer at one of Thailand's most prestigious universities. She has authored many books on bhikkhuni ordination and has paved the way for many Thai women to become bhikkhunis and train at her temple in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. Her mother, Voramai Kabilsingh, was Thailand's first bhikkhuni, although not formally recognised as such.

¹⁷¹ H.H. the Dalai Lama asserts that in the eighth century, when the Indian master Śāntarakṣita (725–788) brought the ordination lineage for monks (*bhikṣus*) to Tibet, he did not bring nuns (*bhikṣuṇīs*), thus the ordination lineage for nuns could not take root in Tibet (Chodron, 2013)

carefully, it implies firstly, that *bhikṣuṇīs* are unimportant, disregarding the contributions¹⁷² of scores of *bhikṣuṇīs* throughout the history of Buddhism, many of them having attained enlightenment or attained any of the four stages of sainthood in early Buddhism. Secondly, it implies that the Buddha instituted the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* anyway, although it was unimportant to do so. Thirdly, the *lamas* of today, who take great pains to ensure that their lineages can be traced right back to the historical Buddha and who religiously adhere to his teachings are seen as refuting the founder's assertion that the "Dhamma is only complete because the four assemblies-bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, laywomen – are present, learned, and skilled in the Dhamma" (Sujato, 2009, p. 152), denying women their right to become *bhikṣuṇīs* is 'sacrilegious', to say the least! Fourth, and perhaps, the most glaring irony in this entire discussion on *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is the fact that men think that becoming *bhikṣu* is important, but not *bhikṣuṇī*. Referring to the Thai monk's statement that form is not important—that being a *bhikṣuṇī* is merely a form, hence, ordination is unnecessary. Yet, it is necessary for him to ordain as a *bhikṣu*?

The spontaneous question that follows that statement is: if form and ordination are unnecessary, why do men need to become monks? (Falk M. L., 2010: 241)

The Bhutanese *bhikṣu*, who studied his *shedra* in India on the other hand, dismissed *bhikṣuṇī* ordination as unimportant because the high *lamas* in Tibetan *Vajrayāna* Buddhism view the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* as such. He spoke confidently that **none** of the high *lamas* has ever said that women should go for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination and that none had done anything to revive¹⁷³ the tradition—unaware of the remarkable progress made in India on

¹⁷² Therīgāthā; Also, Sujato (2009: 12) asserts that Saṅghamittā, Emperor Aśoka's daughter established a bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka, which flourished for over 1000 years. "The Sinhalese Vinaya commentary, preserved in Pali and Chinese versions – says that the bhikkhuni Sangha was established in 'Suvannabhūmi' (Lower Burma or Thailand) under the leadership of the monks Soṇa and Uttāra in the same period. Thus bhikkhunis have been intrinsic to Buddhism of South and South-east Asia since the beginning. Until recent years the bhikkhunis were present in Burma, and possibly in Thailand as well. In 433 CE, the Sri Lankan bhikkhunis led by Ayyā Sārā sailed to China where they subsequently conferred ordination on Chinese nuns, thus establishing the bhikkhuni lineage there. The bhikkhuni order flourished in China, and subsequently spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam." As it turned out, the Chinese order subsequently revived the Bhikkhuni ordination in Sri Lanka in the late twentieth century, after it died out in the eleventh century.

¹⁷³ I say revive because there have been several cases of *bhikṣuṇīs* in Tibet and even Bhutan, a fact which is not well known amongst the sangha in general. A number of great Tibetan masters of the past did fully ordain some of their female disciples, e.g. Shakya Chogden, Bodong Chogle Namgyal and the Eighth Karmapa, Je Mikyö Dorje, one of Tibet's greatest Vinaya scholars (Damcho, 2012). Machig Ongjo (11th century), Chökyi Dronma, the first Samding Doje Phagmo (15th century) and Chammo Jetsunma Konchog Tsomo (Diemberger, 2007) are three rare examples of fully ordained women in Tibet for whom contemporary accounts confirming

this issue in recent decades. He is oblivious to the fact that for the last forty years, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet has spoken in support of revival of the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the tradition (Chodron, 2013). Moreover, much progress has been made with several international conferences debating this matter, especially in the last decade, beginning with the Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Saṃgha in Hamburg, Germany, in July, 2007 which saw research papers on this subject presented by Western and Tibetan scholars. Giant leaps have been made especially in the last four years when in November 2011, spiritual heads of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism commissioned a “high-level scholarly committee”; two each from all four traditions and two additional scholars representing the nuns to reach a concrete conclusion on the possibility of reviving the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage, focusing on the technicalities and specific methods for that purpose (Chodron, 2013). The scholars convened¹⁷⁴ for three months, meticulously sifting through thirteen volumes of the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* which are the root/canonical texts as opposed to past scholars who limited their focus on commentaries to the Tibetan texts and had presented contradictory interpretations of the commentaries.

The bone of contention in the monks’ reticence in not restoring the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* is because the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* dictates the concept of dual-ordination whereby twelve nuns and ten¹⁷⁵ monks are needed in the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination process¹⁷⁶ and since there are no *bhikṣuṇīs* in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* tradition today, ordination cannot take place. This assertion is problematic because it disregards several historical and textual facts. Firstly, the *Vinaya* states that in the absence of the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*, monks can

the ordination survive. An unverified Bhutanese example is Gelongma¹⁷³ Lhaden Zangmo, and probably, Anim Choeten Zangmo (15th century) (Wangmo, 2013:42).

¹⁷⁴ At the Sarah Institute in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, India

¹⁷⁵ According to Thubten Chodron in her article, Introducing Full Ordination for Women into the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, “In lands where such a large number of monastics does not exist, communities of five monks and six bhikṣuṇīs can give the ordination.”

¹⁷⁶ According to Bhikṣuṇī Thubten Chodron, “The first stages of the ordination of nuns, i.e. that of a female lay follower (*upāsikā*), the pre-novice admission to the community (*pravrajyā*), the stage of a novice nun (*śrāmaṇerikā*), a female trainee for full ordination (*śikṣamānā*), as well as the approval of the trainee’s readiness for keeping a lifetime vow of chastity (*brahmacāryopasthānasamvṛti*), can be carried out by the nuns alone, while for the full ordination (*upasampadā*) the order of monks has to be involved.” (Chodron, 2013)

ordain nuns (Chodron, 2013). Second, historical records reveal that monks in Tibet have conferred *bhikṣuṇī* ordination to Tibetan women in the past. Third, there is evidence to show that Mahinda, Emperor Aśoka's son was ordained as a *bhikṣu* under Majjhantika, the later being renowned in both Southern and Northern traditions as the founder of Buddhism in Kaśmīr (Sujato, 2009). Sujato (2009: 196) further traces Majjhantika's lineage:

The Mūlasarvāstivādin texts constantly list him [Majjhantika] as one of the five founding Dhamma Masters who passed down the unbroken lineage from the time of the Buddha to Aśoka. So one of the basic lineage masters of the Mūlasarvāstivāda is the ordination teacher of the founder of Sri Lankan Buddhism [Mahinda]. Saṅghamittā's ordination was held in the same monastery at the same time, so she must also have been ordained in the same lineage. There are, accordingly, no grounds for asserting that the Mūlasarvāstivāda and the Mahāvihāravāsins have separate ordination lineages.

From the above assertion, we can link the Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* who were ordained by the Sri Lankan nuns in the fifth century C.E under the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* to Saṅghamittā, whose own ordination lineage was actually, Mūlasarvāstivāda. Hence, since lineage is a major issue¹⁷⁷ in conferring ordination, there should be no qualms in getting the Chinese nuns to act as preceptors in the dual-ordination of future *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Tibetan tradition who are the monastic descendents of Saṅghamittā, a Mūlasarvāstivāda.

Fourth, Ryōji (2011) opines that the underlying reason for Tibetan monks' rejection of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the tradition is the mistaken assumption that the lifetime vow of chastity (Skt: *brahmacāryopasthānasamvṛti*; Tib: *thangs par spyod pa la nye bar gnas pa'i sdom pa*) is a 'formal ecclesiastical act' which can only be conferred by *bhikṣuṇīs* and since the Mūlasarvāstivāda *bhikṣuṇī* order is not extant, women cannot be fully ordained. Ryōji (2011) contends that this is a misconception as this prerequisite for ordination is not implied in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*. From this perspective, I concur with Sujato (2009:166)'s assertion that "The institution of the dual ordination constitutes a major point of control by the bhikkhus over the bhikkhunis".

¹⁷⁷ Lama Atiśa, the famous Kadampa master was requested by his heart disciple, Dromtonpa not to confer *bhikṣu* ordination on the monks in Tibet because his lineage was not Mūlasarvāstivāda. The Tibetans wanted to maintain only one lineage. (Sujato, 2009)

Lastly, the *bhikṣu* lineage in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism actually died out during the reign of a King Langdarma (838-841 C.E). Later, two Chinese monks, most probably from the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* tradition assisted in reviving the *bhikṣu* order, a fact attested by the Dalai Lama (Chodron, 2013). Therefore, since there is no contention on the authenticity of the current *bhikṣu* lineage in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism because the order is also from Dharmaguptaka, then there should be no objections to a dual-ordination with Chinese Dharmaguptaka *bhikṣuṇīs* acting as preceptors to future *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Tibetan tradition.

Despite all the knitty-gritty technicalities involved in coming up with a solution to restore *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Tibetan tradition, a breakthrough is finally in sight. The result of the deliberations is revealed by Chödrön (2015) as follows:

Through our research, our committee has found Chinese texts establishing the unbroken lineage of Dharmagupta *bhikṣus* going back to the Buddha and of *bhikṣuṇī* going back to the first *bhikṣuṇī* in China in 357¹⁷⁸ C.E. We have clarified the ordination procedures followed in East Asian countries and found them sound. We have also found *Vinaya* passages indicating that a monks' saṃgha alone can give the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Therefore, we are proposing some options for Tibetan *Vinaya* masters to consider. Without going into the intricacies of *Vinaya*, (1) Nuns could receive dual ordination by a Dharmaguptaka *bhikṣuṇī* saṃgha and a Mūlasarvāstivādin monks' saṃgha, with the new *bhikṣuṇīs* receiving the Mūlasarvāstivādin precepts, or (2) Nuns could be ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* by a saṃgha consisting of Tibetan monks of the Mūlasarvāstivādin tradition alone. In either case, after the new *bhikṣuṇīs* have been ordained twelve years, they will be qualified to serve as the *bhikṣuṇī* saṃgha in a dual ordination procedure.

Therefore, it would only be a matter of time before the door to *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is open to women in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition. The Seventeenth Karmapa Orgyen Thrinley Dorje on 24 January 2015¹⁷⁹ made the historical declaration that he would take concrete steps from 2016 towards restoring nuns' vows in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in a process that will take ten years, beginning with the restoration of the *getsulma* (Skt: *śrāmaṇerikā*) vows, training (*śikṣamāṇā*) into begin and finally culminating in *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. This would be made possible through a dual-ordination procedure with nuns from the Dharmagupta tradition alongside *bhikṣus* from

¹⁷⁸ Sri Lankan records date this as 433 C.E. (Sujato, 2009)

¹⁷⁹ During the Second Arya Kshema Winter Dharma teaching at Tergar Monastery, Bodhgaya, India

the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda lineage. The Karmapa said that it is an “*unfortunate situation for Buddhism in general,*” not to offer full ordination to female monastics (Karmapa, 2015).

The Karmapa dismissed his critics who view the revival of *bhikṣuṇī* order as the agitation from a handful of Western nuns. Indeed, the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination issue has long been viewed by the Tibetan and Bhutanese clergy as a feminist quest which has no place in Tibetan Buddhism. Karma, 2015:

We need to understand that the situation now with Bhikṣuṇīs is an important issue. Some people think that there have been some foreign nuns who’ve come over and started making an issue out of it and it’s only then that the Bhikṣuṇī issue has become an important question, and that before it wasn’t important. But that is absolutely not the case. The fact that it was not an important issue for us before is our fault. It’s our problem, and it’s us not living up to our own responsibility. And this is for monks and nuns both—we have both let this slide, so it is all of our responsibility.

While so much of debate is taking place on behalf of nuns in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition, there are nuns in the tradition who are not keen on full-ordination because they view this issue as a feminist agenda or Western propaganda. Gyatso (2010: 10) recalls a statement read by several young Himalayan nuns from the Tibetan tradition under the umbrella of the Tibetan Nuns’ Project in Dharamsala at the Hamburg conference in 2007, stating that “they did not feel ready for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination at this time” and that “they do not wish to be associated with feminist agendas” with several others stating that the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination issue “should not be about issues of gender or sexual equality”. Gyatso (2010: 11) opines that this statement which sent shockwaves throughout the conference hall and dismayed many participants working hard for the revival of the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is rooted in:

...forces in Tibetan society—particularly the very male monastics under whose direction these Tibetan-tradition nuns¹⁸⁰ from Dharamsala and other parts of South Asia now live—are themselves ill-disposed toward (and indeed perhaps threatened by) the specter of feminism. Some women might reasonably want to avoid arousing the ire of their male mentors as a strategic move to remain in their favor, even while some might also try to argue for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination on other grounds.

¹⁸⁰ A rather derogatory manner in which Tibetan Buddhist nuns are called in the Tibetan circles.

Indeed, based on my interviews with the nuns, there was some resistance on the part of the nuns who fear that they would not be able to keep the precepts. In fact, the monks were more supportive of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. This finding corresponds to Falk's (2010) that more monks than *maechees* were in favour of full ordination in the Thai context.

Thubten Chödrön (2015) stresses that the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is not a feminist issue, citing that women should be given a chance to progress on the path to enlightenment by means of living the full precepts. It would be unfair if access to ordination is blocked by a few nuns and monks perception that *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is a feminist agenda.

6.9.2 New Developments in Bhutan

While all the new and exciting developments are ongoing in India, the Zhung Dratshang or monastic body in Bhutan is keeping noble silence on this matter. This matter was brought up at the 1st International Buddhist Nuns' Conference in Paro, Bhutan organised by the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation (BNF) in December 2013. I was present at the conference when Gangteng Trulku, a private Rinpoche was giving his speech in support of nuns' monastic education touched on the subject of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, he inadvertently stirred a hornet's nest in the conference hall, in front of Her Majesty Ashi Tshering Yangdon, the Queen Mother and patron of BNF:

If the lineage¹⁸¹ is indeed 'authentic' [meaning, can be traced back to the Buddha], then there should be no reason not to confer *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in Bhutan.

This statement caused uproar among the Western and Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* present as they are ordained in the Dharmaguptaka lineage. These *bhikṣuṇīs* misunderstood Gangteng Trulku's statement, delivered in Dzongkha (but translated into English) and thought that he was questioning the authenticity of the Dharmaguptaka nuns' lineage. I

¹⁸¹ Of the the proposed preceptors in the dual-ordination process, e.g. Chinese nuns from Dharmaguptaka

comprehended the statement differently as in Dzongkha, Gangteng Trulku merely wanted to ensure that any lineage involved in the dual-ordination process should be authentic. In my opinion, Gangteng Trulku is by far the first male master in Bhutan to truly lend his support for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination openly in an international platform in the presence of Bhutanese media and royalty. I am not too sure if he would continue to do so openly after he was censured by international nuns for a mere misconception.

While the Bhutanese clergy is keeping mum on the subject of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, it is heartening to note that hardly six months after the conference, whereby I presented my paper on the status of ordination of Bhutanese nuns in front of Her Majesty and subsequently met her in a private audience to discuss the matter; the BNF in collaboration with the Zhung Dratshang embarked on a massive *śrāmaṇerikā* or *getsulma* ordination ceremony. Bhutan Nuns Foundation, 2014:

The controversy on the nuns' full *Gelongma* ordination (Bikshuni).....was one of the focal points which emerged from the Paro conference. However, it also became clear that not all communities are aware of the possibilities that are already open to those nuns wishing to formalize their choice of spiritual life. *Getsulma* ordination, for instance, has been possible in Bhutan for a long time. Obviously there was a need for information at a basic level, and BNF set out to fill this gap, thereby setting a new milestone for Bhutanese nuns.

Despite the fact that BNF was formed in 2009, they were largely unaware of the ordination status of the Bhutanese nuns. The conference gave me the opportunity to reveal this dark truth from my fieldwork in 2012 which was positively followed-up by Her Majesty through the BNF. The massive ordination ceremony was held on 10 May 2014, with 140 nuns from seven nunneries across Bhutan receiving the *getsulma* ordination from the Je Khenpo at the Sangchhen Dorji Lhendrup nunnery in Wolakha, Punakha. BNF provides a glimpse of the mass ordination ceremony, the first of its kind for nuns in Bhutan:

...ceremony were divided into two groups before being admitted to the *Lhakhang* (temple) and the presence of His Holiness in a garb meant to symbolize the lay state, their heads shaven except for a last tuft on the crown. As a group, the nuns answered the Je Khenpo's questions about their past conduct, and professed their steadfast intention to dedicate themselves to the path of spirituality. The last lock of hair was then symbolically cut, they were dismissed and returned in groups of three

with the special robe, shawl and mat required by the ceremony, on this occasion a gift from BNF's sponsors from Singapore. The Je Khenpo blessed each group in turn and imparted ritual instructions. After that, the entire group returned again wearing the newly blessed robes to receive their *Dharma* name (*Chö ming*) from the Je Khenpo. They are now ordained *Getsulma* and will wear the saffron robe, made of small squares to symbolize the Buddha's original patched-together cloak, for all high liturgical occasions.

The BNF article mentioned that the *getsulma* ordination is the “first formal stage of monastic life in Mahāyāna Buddhism (Foundation B. N., 2014). Actually, the *Vinaya* is not divided according to Mahāyāna or Theravāda¹⁸². According to Sujato (2009: 7),

Vinaya says nothing about ordination lineages, nothing about Mūlasarvāstivāda, nothing about Dharmaguptaka, nothing about Theravāda, nothing about Tibet, nothing about China, and nothing about Sri Lanka or Thailand... The distinction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna does not stem from the *Vinaya*, but is a hangover from ancient rivalries, as recorded in the polemical histories of the schools.

Moreover, the article said that the *getsulmas* have to abide by ten precepts. Though technically correct, in actuality, the *getsulmas* or *śrāmaṇerikā* abide by thirty-six precepts, as per the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*. All (Skt: *pratimokṣa*¹⁸³; Pāli: *pātimokkha*) vows of either *śrāmaṇerikā* or *bhikṣuṇīs* are in fact derived from the basic ten¹⁸⁴. The article did not mention if the nuns were sensitised on their *getsulma* precepts/vows before ordination, which is almost certainly not the case in any Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist ordination. It is one thing to ordain as *getsulma* and quite another matter to be actually aware of and abide by the precepts. The reason is because nuns have no access to the *Vinaya*. Tashi Phuntsho, a monk I interviewed suggested that both monks and nuns should only opt for full ordination when they are more matured so that they can really keep the precepts.

It is not good without ordination but in a way it is good not to go for [full] ordination, especially when the monks and nuns are very young. If they have an older *samgha* with them then they can be controlled. Otherwise they will not only lead themselves down to hell but they will lead their teachers and *lamas* down. When I was small we were also taken to Mongar from Lhuntse to be

¹⁸² The *Vinaya* texts which are extant today are from the schools of early Buddhism such as: Mahāvihāravāsin, Dharmaguptaka, Mahīśāsaka, Mahāsaṅghika, Lokuttaravāda, Mūlasarvāstivāda, Sarvāstivāda, of which, only Mahāvihāravāsin, Dharmaguptaka and Mūlasarvāstivāda are a living tradition.

¹⁸³ *prati-mokṣa*, m. (√mokṣ,) liberation, deliverance • (with Buddh.) emancipation • the formulary for releasing monks by penances
¹⁸⁴ 1. Intentional killing of a human being; 2. Stealing; 3. Sexual intercourse (both heterosexual or homosexual, involving penetration); 4. Lying about one's spiritual attainments; 5. Taking intoxicants; 6. Singing, dancing, playing music; 7. Wearing perfume, ornaments or cosmetics to beautify the body; 8. Sitting on a high or expensive bed or throne; 9. Eating after midday; 10. Touching gold, silver or precious objects (including money) (Chodron, 1996)

ordained as *getsulpa* (*śramaṇera*) but I did not understand anything. But fortunately I am still in the robes and did not leave the monastery [disrobe].

The monk has pointed out a common scenario amongst monks and nuns in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition in general, that they do not know the precepts! This is because they are not sensitised before and even after ordination. This is exactly why many disrobe or are lax in their morality. As Gutschow (2004: 184) aptly surmised,

At the time you hold the vows, you don't know the *Vinaya*. By the time you know the *Vinaya*, you may no longer hold the vows" (*sdom pa yod dus, 'dul ba med. 'dul ba yod dus, sdom pa med*). The *Vinaya* is largely inaccessible to monks and nuns before they take ordination vows.

My interactions with the nuns in both nunneries bear testimony to the nuns' overwhelming ignorance of their *getsulma* precepts, some of which I have highlighted in Chapter Five. Although the monk is right in saying that full ordination should be reserved for matured monks and nuns, this cannot be a basis for denying nuns full ordination because the *Vinaya* itself has safeguards. The *Pācittiya* rules 115¹⁸⁵ and 116¹⁸⁶ prohibit any *bhikṣuṇī* to ordain a maiden below the age of twenty and who has not undergone the compulsory two-year probationary period (Skt: *sikṣamāṇā*). Therefore the problems of immaturity and lack of training is already taken care of by the *Vinaya* by instituting the age and probationary requirement. Many laypeople have also expressed similar concerns that monks and nuns who ordain young tend not to keep their precepts. My argument is that those who flout their precepts are often those who have never been taught the precepts, i.e. ignorance is bliss!

Nonetheless, another interesting development in Bhutan is the most recent introduction of the noviate programme for female practitioners in the country. On 26 August 2015, five laywomen took the novice vows and lived as nuns for a week at the Kila Goenpa in

¹⁸⁵ 115. Whatever bhikkhunī should ordain a maiden who is not 20 years of age, there is an offence of expiation.

¹⁸⁶ 116. Whatever bhikkhunī should ordain a maiden who is 20 years of age but has not trained in the six dhammas and six anudhammas, there is an offence of expiation. Note: Six dhammas: the five precepts and abstain from taking of solid food after noon. The six anudhammas are: not touching a male's body, not accepting gold and silver, not digging the ground, not shaving hair (at secret places), not destroying the green and not eating without being offered.

Paro. They are the first batch of which the Zhung Dratshang is experimenting with to “allow them to practise the dharma and to experience life of practitioners”. These women, who took their *genyen dompa*, i.e. ordination meant for laypersons from Zhung Dratshang’s Leytshog Lopen, donned the robes of a nun and observed all the rituals and devoted their time in prayers and meditation. These women will receive certificates from Zhung Dratshang (Dema, 2015). This is an important initiative to give women a chance to try out the life of a nun before actually jumping into anything which they do not understand. In addition, in the most recent development, the Zhung Dratshang issued a circular on 11 June 2015 whereby even laypeople can join *shedras* under it, take vows and ordination, and devote their time in prayers and meditation from a week to few months (Dema, 2015).

6.9.3 The Benefits of *Bhikṣuṇī* Ordination for the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist Nuns

The laypeople interviewed in this study are generally very supportive of nuns going for full-ordination. One layperson expressed the importance of keeping one’s precepts:

Ordination is important and then one can proceed for the *losum chusum* retreat. When one is old and if one does not have the vows, it would be of no use. When laypeople prostrate, we feel satisfied as they follow the precepts. The people also will be benefited when the vow holder spends a night¹⁸⁷ in people’s house. There is a saying that “Don’t hurry for dharma and don’t delay for lay life” (Dzongkha: *damchoe ma ha, jigten ma che*).

Most of the monks I interviewed agree to ordain nuns if the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is revived in Bhutan, i.e. if they qualify¹⁸⁸ and are given the chance. Also, the female postulants have to be thoroughly examined first, and then only the monks decide to confer ordination. However, few monks have the confidence that they qualify at all, as one monk honestly declares:

¹⁸⁷ Monks and nuns are usually hosted with the highest honour in the top-most part of the house, usually in the altar room, their exalted status as a reflection of their status as ordained persons. Without precepts, the honour is in vain.

¹⁸⁸ Have to be a *bhikṣu* of ten years standing with impeccable moral character

I will ordain nuns if I am given an opportunity but if the other does not follow well then it will pull both the giver and the recipient to suffering. So we really have to examine them first and then if I am asked to ordain I will. If I myself do not follow the precepts well I won't ordain anyone.

The respect which the laypeople say comes from keeping the precepts stems from the Bhutanese and Himalayan belief that maintenance of precepts purifies stores of negative karma and creates great positive potential (merit). This acts as a basis for obtaining higher rebirths in the future which in turn enables one to continue practicing the dharma and finally attain liberation and enlightenment (Chödrön, 2015).

The Seventeenth Karmapa cited several reasons as to why the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* is important, firstly from the perspective of the *Lamrim*¹⁸⁹, on the basis of the four-pillars of Buddhism. The *Lamrim Chenmo* also mentions that higher training in ethics is the stairway to all other virtuous practices, the foundation of all good qualities. Another importance of the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* is their role in the continuation of the monastic tradition and the preservation of the Buddhadharma in this world:

In many texts it says that what determines whether the teachings of the Buddha are present in a country is whether the teachings of the *Vinaya* are present in that country or not. And that depends on whether there is the practice of the three foundational rituals¹⁹⁰.... If we think about it in terms of male practitioners, we have the trainings and the three foundational rituals. Yet, for women, we don't have the three foundational rituals, and certainly not as described in the *Vinaya*, because there are no *Bhikṣuṇīs*. So, it's important for us to have *Bhikṣuṇīs* who are able to maintain the practice of the three foundational rituals. This is necessary.

The Karmapa cited that it would be difficult to authenticate the ordination of nuns performed without the participation of fully-ordained nuns. He opines that any ordination done by monks alone is not entirely undisputable, and including all the *getsulma* (Skt: *śrāmaṇerikā*) ordinations performed over the centuries by monks alone because there are no *bhikṣuṇīs* (Karmapa, 2015):

¹⁸⁹ Stages of the Path to Enlightenment by Lama Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelugpa tradition

¹⁹⁰ These three rituals refer to the sojong or twice-monthly confession ceremony for monks and nuns, the rains retreat, and a special ceremony relating to the rains retreat.

Without a Bhikṣuṇī saṃgha it is very difficult to truly give the monastic vows to women. Now there is debate as to whether the Bhikṣu saṃgha is able to give the Bhikṣuṇī ordination to women or not. Some say that the Bhikṣu saṃgha is able to follow the ritual text and give it, while others say they are not. There is much debate about this.

In the context of the Gelugpa system of philosophical studies, until recently, nuns were excluded from studying the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayasūtra*, a compulsory subject for monk candidates for the prestigious Geshe degree because nuns are not eligible for full-ordination, they were therefore obstructed from obtaining the Geshema degree. Although nuns need not study the *Vinaya* in order to proceed for the Geshema exams, Thubten Chödrön (2013) opines that “as long as the nuns are not fully ordained and have not studied the *Vinaya* in its entirety, their Geshema degrees cannot be considered the full equivalent of the Geshe degree, and they cannot perform all of the rituals.” (Chödrön, , 2015).

There are some who fear that nuns’ ego would be inflated after becoming *bhikṣuṇīs*. Though it is possible that pride and power can overtake one’s genuine motivations for full-ordination, Gyatso (2010:16) says that it would be erroneous to “conflate concerns about prestige and reputation with the kinds of problems of ego that Buddhism always warns us against”. She maintains that “prestige and status are essential to the success of the Buddhist saṃgha”. I concur with her assertion and wish to add that the reason monks are esteemed and nuns hold a lower position in society because monks are ‘greater fields of merit’ since they have access to *bhikṣu* ordination. I have observed in my entire monastic career that monks, whether one is a novice, *bhikṣu* or just dressed in the robes are always called *lama* and in the Bhutanese context, ‘*gelong*’ but nuns are always referred to as ‘Ani’, which is a pejorative term since it literally means ‘Aunty’, implying nuns’ traditional roles as illiterate and free labour for the household, tending to nephews and nieces in their natal home. When nuns start becoming *bhikṣuṇīs*, society’s perception of

nuns as lesser monastics is bound to change and nuns will finally be equal ‘fields of merit’ as the monks.

Bhikṣuṇīs in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism “will represent a victory over patriarchy and misogyny” (Gyatso, 2010: 20). The benefits of being a *bhikṣuṇī* are very relevant to tackle, in part, the discrimination and difficulties that we have seen in the study of the nuns at Jachung Karmo and Jashar Goenpa. If the nuns have access to *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, they will finally get a chance to study the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayasūtra*, and will be aware of the profound rules which are meant to safeguard female renunciants. *Bhikṣuṇīs* will no longer be exploited by monks and laypeople for their labour or bodies. Nuns would then know how to deal with sexual advances from monks and understand that they should not be washing the robes of monks or doing housework for laypeople such as washing their clothes and mending their fences (as we have seen in Chapter Five). *Bhikṣuṇīs* should abstain from spinning yarn, weaving and they should not even be cooking—an activity which we see many nuns currently involved in the two nunneries studied. Nuns would finally get the opportunity to fully concentrate on their practice without the added burden of doing nunnery chores. For this to materialise, major institutional changes are needed like in Theravāda societies, laypeople would need to play a more supportive role in caring for the nuns. Most importantly, nuns will learn how to keep their own conduct in check and understand that disrespect to senior nuns and indulgence in intoxicants entails an offence of expiation. As Chödrön (2013) explains, “our mind will be peaceful and calm; we will no longer be propelled by our bad habits; and distractions in meditation will arise less often”. In the final analysis, lay practitioners and society in general will reap the benefits of having educated and confident *bhikṣuṇīs* in their midst (Chödrön, 2013).

I end this chapter on the Bhutanese nuns’ struggle for gender equality in religious practice with a short reflection. For Buddhism to be credible and relevant in the twenty-

first century in line with the increasingly egalitarian sentiments of people around the globe, it is of utmost urgency to address elements of patriarchy, androcentrism, and misogyny. Otherwise, it is unlikely that Buddhism can maintain widespread respect in the international community today (Gyatso, 2010:17).

6.10 Summary

In this chapter, I have highlighted the main challenges for Buddhist nuns in my study area; the lack of ordination status and lack of access to the three-tier monastic education system and various other challenges related to the nuns' empowerment. I also examined the level of empowerment of the nuns and showed that the nuns at the private-run Jashar Goenpa had better access to monastic training and were better supported financially compared to the government-run Jachung Karmo nuns. This chapter also included a critique of the ordination procedures and failure of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism in conferring full-ordination to nuns, thereby, disempowering them and relegating the nuns to a lower status in society.

In summary, the underachievement of Bhutanese nuns in their spiritual practice and education in the study area is directly attributed to inadequate male-dominated Buddhist institutions, which provide ample opportunities for men to achieve higher spiritual attainments but limit the potential of women. Nuns are also subjected to sexual abuse but are silenced by the all-powerful male dominated clergy. There is little willingness on the part of the male-dominated *samgha* to change the status-quo which brings them much benefit. In Bhutan, the Buddhist institutions fail to view patriarchy as nothing more than incidental events arising out of causes and conditions instead of holding on steadfastly to institutional androcentricism as if it were eternal truths.

CHAPTER 7: RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM: EMPOWERMENT OR SUBORDINATION?

7.1 Religious Symbolism—a Psychological Tool for Empowerment or Dependence on Men?

Symbols have always been an integral part of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism and serve as powerful catalysts to train the mind towards enlightenment. As such, feminine symbolism, either in the form of *ḍākinīs* (Tib: *khandroma*), female meditational deities (Tib: *yidam*), legendary, historical or living female masters have and continue to serve as potent objects of inspiration to Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners, Bhutanese nuns included.

This chapter introduces feminine symbolism which empowers women in the tradition, beginning with female meditational deities, either in the form of *ḍākinīs* such as Vajrayoginī or as the Buddha Ārya Tāra. I will attempt to explain how these divine female personalities, which are personifications of wisdom, the secret *ḍākinī* or Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*, impact women practitioners. Subsequently, I have selected three historical personalities, three of which have been mentioned in the preceding chapters, i.e. Yeshe Tsogyal, Machig Lhabdron and Gelongma Palmo to demonstrate their relevance to the lives of female practitioners. The impact they had on the lives of both male and female practitioners are highlighted in order to show how relevant these great female masters were and still are to Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners.

In this chapter, I will also present the lives of two recent female masters associated with the two nunneries studied; Anim Lopenma Paldon, the late abbess of Jachung Karmo Nunnery and the contemporary Anim Trulku Chözang Lhamo, reincarnation of Anim Woesel Chöden, the founder of Jashar Goenpa. The rationale for including the lives of these female masters is to demonstrate that Bhutanese women have achieved high

realizations, and in both cases, far surpassing that of monks. Their life stories are narrated in order to provide a background on why these masters are so highly regarded by the nuns and local communities, especially women practitioners who yearn for real-life role models in a male dominated religious tradition.

Nonetheless, Buddhist feminists have long pointed out that there is a denial and even repression of female presence in the symbol systems and practices in Buddhism. There are deeply embedded exercises of control, and secret practices that have displaced women's subjectivity, especially in the monastic realm and secret tantric practices, as I would be highlighting in the later sections of this chapter.

7.2 The *Ḍākinī* Symbolism

In Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, the *Ḍākinī* is a powerful and profound symbol of the true nature of mind. The *Ḍākinī* is a creative and powerful metaphor of transformation of the tantric practitioner's gross conceptual mind into wisdom realizing emptiness (Simmer-Brown, 2002). Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist scholars have always been hard-pressed to define the *Ḍākinī* (Simmer-Brown, 2002). Nonetheless, in general, there are two types of *Ḍākinī*, the worldly *Ḍākinī* and wisdom *Ḍākinī*.

The *Ḍākinī* which is the essence of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practice is the wisdom *Ḍākinī*. The wisdom *Ḍākinī*¹⁹¹ is synonymous with the feminine principle, which is wisdom, the primordial wisdom mind. The wisdom *Ḍākinī* may be a *yidam*, a meditational deity; female deity yogas such as *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Vajrayoginī* are common in Tibetan Buddhism. Or she may be a protector; the wisdom *Ḍākinīs* have the special power

¹⁹¹ When the *Ḍākinī* appears in visions or dreams in her action mode, she is said to carry out the activities of wisdom and is often called a karma *Ḍākinī*. This action form is not really different from the wisdom aspect of the *Ḍākinī* but appears in whatever way would be effective and beneficial. The wisdom *Ḍākinī* is a manifestation of the mind aspect of the guru and practitioner, while the karma *Ḍākinī* is the guise that wisdom takes when executing its realization. In this area, the karma *Ḍākinī* is often the one who actually appears to the tantric practitioner, mirroring one's delusions, energizing one's meditation practice, and activating one's realization (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 236).

and responsibility to protect the integrity of oral transmissions. Simmer-Brown (2002: 88) defines the wisdom *ḍākinī* thus:

The wisdom *ḍākinī* is fully awakened and acts to awaken others. She is the essence of enlightened mind beyond any concept of gender, the preeminent symbol of the nature of mind itself, in a female form. She simultaneously realizes the ultimate nature of phenomena, embodies it through her manifestation, and acts it out in her enlightened activity. She is the supreme protector of the teachings, a tantric guru, a female buddha with her glorious retinue.

A *ḍākinī* is commonly understood as a female manifestation of an enlightened being. In the biographies of Vajrayāna Buddhist masters, she has played various roles, including that of external instructor of the secret Vajrayāna teachings, one who empowers the practitioner in meditation and protector of the tantric lineages to ensure that only those with the purest motivation are able to penetrate their essence. On a deeper level, she is none other than a personification of the tantric practitioners own body and innate wisdom mind. Therefore, the *ḍākinī* carries the connotation of both external objectified deity (inner and outer-outer) as well the inner experience of the tantric practitioner's body (outer) and mind (secret) (Simmer-Brown, 2002).

The four levels of *ḍākinī* can be explained through the meditational practice of deity yoga or *yidam* practice. The outer-outer *ḍākinī* is actually the embodied *ḍākinī* and synonymous with the mantra-born *ḍākinī* (Skt: *dharanija*, Tib: *ngak-kye khandroma*), who are tantric practitioners who engage in deity yoga practices. These practitioners must take initiation from a qualified guru and then practice the tantric liturgy (Skt: *sādhana*, Tib: *drubthab*). Prior to engaging in the deity yoga practice, these practitioners are also caught up in conventional understanding relating to gender and realizations. As they progress in the generation stage practice, they begin to discard conventional grasping to self and dualistic conceptions, including the dichotomies of masculine-feminine, i.e. preoccupations with gender. Simmer-Brown (2002: 96) cites a famous quote:

Between *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* there's a difference
In how their bodies may seem in apparent reality,
But for Mahāmudrā, luminous clarity,
There's not an atom of difference in their essential nature.

The completion stage practice has two aspects, “subtle-body yoga and direct experience of the nature of mind” (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 101). The outer *ḍākinī* corresponds to the subtle-body yoga. The outer *ḍākinī* and those who are able to manifest the outer *ḍākinī* have realized the highest attainment or integration of body and mind. An outer *ḍākinī* can also be a sacred-realm *ḍākinī* (Skt: *kṣetraja*, Tib: *shing-kye khandroma*) who has taken birth from a pure realm (Tib: *shing kham*) and usually carry out specific activities such as protecting the Vajrayāna teachings. A sacred-realm *ḍākinī* is one who has “become a sacred-realm *ḍākinī* through emanation or through practice attainments in this life.” (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 101). The inner *ḍākinī* refers to the meditational deity (Skt: *iṣṭadevatā*, Tib: *yidam*) which is the focus of the tantric deity yoga practice. The deity symbolises the mind's co-emergent wisdom. These *ḍākinīs* are no longer bound by dualistic preoccupations such as masculine-feminine etc. and are regarded as noble beings (Skt: *ārya* Tib: *phagpa*). Those who have had a direct realization of emptiness have the ability to be spontaneous. We come across many great female masters who spontaneously act for the benefit of sentient beings, e.g. they sing spontaneous songs of liberation or teach in spontaneous verse etc. (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 99). Finally, the secret *ḍākinī* corresponds to the “naked awareness of the nature of mind, experienced as vast and luminous space” (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 101). Accomplishment of the completion stage results in the experience of clear appearance (Skt: *selnang*), the union of bliss and emptiness, the realm of the secret *ḍākinī* (Simmer-Brown, 2002).

Contrary to traditional norms which view *ḍākinīs* only as reincarnations of female masters or as human consorts to male gurus, which is the case in Bhutan, the *ḍākinī* is not a gendered symbol and is not confined to the feminine. Though the *ḍākinī* expresses the feminine gender at the relative level, at the ultimate level, the *ḍākinī* is a symbol of egolessness, i.e. beyond gender. Simmer-Brown (2002:105) quotes Nāgārjuna thus:

Because the expanse of reality is not "I,"
It is not a "woman," not a "man."
It is completely freed from all grasping.

How could it be designated as an "I"?
In all phenomena without attachment
Neither woman, nor man [are] conceived.
To tame those who are blinded by desire
A "woman" and a "man" are taught.

The secret *ḍākinī*, or the ‘mother principle’ is referred to as the Great Mother (Tib: *yum chenmo*); the *Dharmakāya* Great Mother (Skt: *prajñāpāramitā*; Tib: *choku yum chenmo*). These different names for the secret *ḍākinī* refer to the emptiness of self and phenomena and the wisdom that sees things as they really are. The Perfection of Wisdom (Skt: *prajñāpāramitā*; Tib: *she rab kyi pha rol tu chin pa*) sutras revolve around the Great Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*, a symbol of emptiness and the wisdom that realizes emptiness. The Heart Sutra, the shortest of the perfection of wisdom sutras and recited by nuns in both nunneries studied, contains the essence of Nāgārjuna’s doctrine of emptiness which explains that phenomena is neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing. According to Simmer-Brown (2002: 109), “There has never been an abiding essence in any phenomenon, hence no phenomena have even a fleeting existence”.

Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* is the mother of all buddhas and bodhisattvas for two reasons, firstly, because she is the ground of all realization, i.e. emptiness itself. Secondly, she is the wisdom¹⁹² that realizes emptiness (Skt: *prajñā*, Tib: *sherab*) of self and phenomena. She is synonymous with the buddha nature (Skt: *tathāgatagarbha*), i.e. the womb of all buddhas precisely because it is the ground from which all buddhas arise. For the tantric practitioner, Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*, the secret *ḍākinī* is both the true nature of one’s mind, i.e. the buddha nature itself and also the practitioners’ own realization of the non-dual and essentially empty nature of one’s primordial mind. Since phenomena are not created, therefore, Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* should not be taken literally as a being who gives birth to a progeny. Rather, she is the symbolic ‘mother’, i.e. without whom, there

¹⁹² Also referred to as ‘penetrating insight’ by Simmer-Brown (2002)

would be no buddhas and bodhisattvas because without wisdom realizing emptiness, it is not possible to achieve buddhahood. It is Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* who nurtures her offspring in developing penetrating insight into the true nature of self and phenomena and without this insight, buddhahood is not attained. Therefore, the origin of buddhas and bodhisattvas is the Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*. Due to its maternal connotation, in later perfection of wisdom sutras, the Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* is depicted as a female deity and venerated in Mahāyāna Buddhism (Simmer-Brown, 2002).

In the Nyingma school, the source of all enlightenment is Samantabhadri (Tib: *kuntuzangmo*), the consort and counterpart of the primordial buddha of the Nyingma tradition, i.e. Samantabhadra (Tib: *kuntuzangpo*). Samantabhadri represents the “formless space of wisdom, the *dharmakāya* dimension of buddhahood in whom delusion and conceptual thought have never arisen” and is the primary symbol of the awareness-wisdom aspect of mind (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: 97). Both Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* and Samantabhadri are none other than the most subtle aspect of the *ḍākinī*, i.e. secret *ḍākinī*. Thus, all practices in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, including the various *ḍākinī* manifestations have only one aim, to uncover the secret *ḍākinī* which is one’s ultimate nature of mind.

Thus, whether it is Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* or Samantabhadri, the reference to the limitless space, emptiness, natural state of mind, i.e. the ultimate truth in the feminine aspect is extremely liberating for women as at the relative level, women need role models to encourage them that enlightenment is possible for women. Once the practitioner fully penetrates the true nature mind, one understands that the enlightened mind transcends gender and this is what makes it possible for all practitioners, male and female to attain enlightenment.

In Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, personal gurus play a very important role in introducing the student to the true nature of mind (Tib: *semthri*). This is exactly the kind

of training that the *tshampa* nuns under Gyeltshen Trulku are undergoing. The gender of the guru or the practitioner is irrelevant as the true nature mind transcends all forms of duality. Hence, men and women have the same potential to become enlightened. Guru Padmasambhava proclaimed to Yeshe Tsogyal that when a woman practices the path with pure *bodhicitta*, her potential for enlightenment is greater than that of men because she is the very embodiment of wisdom:

Kyema Ho!
Yoginī seasoned in the Secret Mantra! The ground of Liberation
Is this human frame, this common human form—
And here distinctions, male or female,
Have no consequence.
And yet if bodhicitta graces it,
A woman's form indeed will be supreme! (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: 91)

The secret *dākinī* which is synonymous with Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*, is the ultimate symbol of soteriological androgyny, beyond gender. Indeed, it is because of the nondual nature of Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*, the secret *dākinī*, that many women who followed the Vajrayāna path have realized their true nature mind and attained enlightenment.

In the context of the *Nyungne* fasting practice which is the core practice of the nuns at Jachung Karmo, it is also a type of deity yoga practice of Thousand-Armed Chenrezig. It consists of the generation and completion stage practices. Thousand-Armed Chenrezig is a *sambhogakāya* buddha, a subtle manifestation of the union of wind and mind, representing enlightened energy. According to Wangchen (2009: 89),

Such form inherently exists in the pure nature of mind and can manifest to everyone, because pure buddha nature is the nature of all sentient beings.” Simmer-Brown (2002: 72) asserts that the generation stage practice is when “the tantric practitioner becomes the deity and realizes the emptiness and luminosity of all apparent existence through the deity's blessing”. One cultivates insight into the ultimate nature of mind during by knowing that the form is appearing yet empty in its nature.

Like any other Vajrayāna practice, every part of the *Nyungne* practice serves to remind the practitioner of the ultimate goal of the practice, which is the realization of the true nature of mind, the Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*. The entire *Nyungne* text is populated with

expressions of the emptiness nature of self and phenomena. Beginning with the taking of the Sojong vows, the practitioner is reminded thus (Wangchen, 2009: 64):

Perfect liberation is the quality of Buddha's mind, the perfect relinquishment of all that needs to be relinquished; mind that is free from any stains of affliction or obstruction to omniscience. ...In the presence of complete relinquishment, there is a completely perfected wisdom understanding of the emptiness nature of self and phenomena.

Then, when reciting the seven branch prayers, which is a means to accumulate merit, all the actions and reflections in the seven branches are understood in light of emptiness. Taking the confession prayer for example, Wangchen (2009: 81) explains how the understanding of emptiness is incorporated into the confession:

Ultimately, confession is understanding the emptiness nature of phenomena. In that realm one transcends everything including confession, negative deeds, and ignorance. This understanding of emptiness has to be true realization. Conceptual understanding would not be sufficient to truly purify everything.

Wangchen (2009: 93) provides a glimpse of the generation stage practice of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara. Firstly, like other deity yoga practices, one dissolves oneself and all phenomena into emptiness:

We begin with the recitation of the mantra: *OM SVABHAWA SHUDDHA SARVA DHARMA SVABHAWA SHUDDHO HAM* and imagine all phenomena, including our bodies, as completely dissolved with no residue. If this is difficult, because your body and other things around you are still there, concentrate on withdrawing your sense consciousness from them so that your attention is entirely focused on their imagined emptiness. Then focus one-pointedly on the elements you visualize as appearing from that emptiness. From emptiness, we visualize a green letter PAM that turns into a multicolored, eight-petaled lotus. Next we visualize a white letter AH above the lotus that turns into a moon cushion. A white syllable HRIH appears on the moon cushion, and this HRIH is your mind....The letter HRIH emanates light rays that purify the negativities and obscurations of all sentient beings in all realms of *samsāra*, causing them to become Chenrezig. Then all the Chenrezigs dissolve into light and, together with the light which you have emanated, come back to you and dissolve into the letter HRIH. The white letter HRIH transforms into a blazing golden HRIH on a golden lotus, which remains on top of the original multicolored lotus and moon cushion. Light rays emanate from the golden letter HRIH and golden lotus in the form of hooks and lassos, inviting all the buddhas and bodhisattvas from the ten directions who appear in the form of Chenrezig. They dissolve into the golden letter HRIH, causing the HRIH to turn into an image of you as Thousand-Armed Chenrezig. Since the seed syllable HRIH is your mind, the image derived from the HRIH is your mental body with the characteristics of Thousand-Armed Chenrezig. Its nature is like the moon's reflection on water, or that of a rainbow, not solid like a material object.

Visualizing oneself as the deity itself, in the case of *Nyungne*, Chenrezig is a skilful means for the practitioner to “to completely abandon one's own ordinary perception of body and to meditate on the supreme deity body, i.e. “This supreme deity body is

appearing yet in essence, empty; emptiness, yet clearly appearing” (Wangchen, 2009: 99). In *Nyungne* practice, “a purification and perfection takes place in each step of the main visualization process” (Wangchen, 2009: 93). Thus, *Nyungne* is a skilful means to transform every aspect of the impure phenomena of our existence into pure phenomena. When the front generation deity is visualised for the purpose of generating deep devotion to the deity (who is in nature, emptiness) in the practitioner, this is followed by mantra recitation. In tantra one can find statements such as (Wangchen, 2009: 119):

“If one dwells in nonconceptual mind, one is naturally dwelling in the deity and mantra.” The reason we are saying this is because it describes the natural state of being, and when one is in such a natural state of being, one is automatically reciting the Six-Syllable Mantra. OM is the foundation for body, AH is the foundation for speech, HUNG is the natural reverse of *samsāra*, the meaning of dharmata. A sentient being’s body, speech, and mind are naturally the three syllables; the enlightened body, speech, and mind are also the three syllables. OM is the essence of all the buddhas’ body, and it purifies a sentient being’s body and enables sambhogakāya buddha body. AH is the essence of all the buddhas’ speech, and it purifies a sentient being’s speech and enables *nirmāṇakāya* buddha body. HUNG is the essence of all the buddhas’ mind and it purifies a sentient being’s mind and enables *dharmakāya* buddha body.

In *Nyungne*, the mantra OM MANI PADME HUNG (Six-Syllable Mantra) is recited. Every syllable of the mantra has connotations of the ultimate nature of mind, which is the goal of the practice. The completion stage involves the dissolution of the created deities¹⁹³ form into emptiness. The rationale for the dissolution is that since the deity arises from emptiness, it must naturally dissolve into its origin, which is emptiness. The deity is able to arise precisely because the nature of self and phenomena is emptiness. Wangchen (2009: 153) describes the self-dissolution part of the completion stage practice as follows:

The commitment deity of the frontal visualization (*samayasattva*), along with his palace and retinue of buddhas, dissolves into one’s self-visualization of Chenrezig. The self-visualization dissolves into a visualization of Two-Armed Chenrezig. Two-Armed Chenrezig dissolves into the thumb-sized Chenrezig at the heart center, and the thumb-sized Chenrezig dissolves into the seed syllable HRIH at his own heart center. The letter HRIH becomes a small sphere of light, which in turn becomes smaller and smaller until it dissolves into emptiness. One should end prayers and remain in this pure state of mind, a nonconceptual mind free of fabrications and elaborations. When one arises from meditation, one enters into the next stage, the postmeditative state. In the postmeditative state one instantaneously imagines that one is in the form of Two-Armed Chenrezig.

¹⁹³ Wisdom deity (Skt: *jnanasattva*, Tib: *yeshe sempa*) refers to the real Chenrezig. Commitment deity (Skt: *samayasattva*; Tib: *damsig sempa*) is the image which we create by means of our visualization. In this case, the commitment deity is the Thousand-Armed Chenrezig visualized in front of us.

In post-meditation, the *Nyungne* practitioner is encouraged to try to develop sacred and pure outlook by constantly reflecting that the place where one dwells is the land of Great Bliss (Pureland of Buddha Amitabha), or the pureland of Chenrezig, Potala. Everyone whom the practitioner comes into contact with is in the aspect of Chenrezig, all sounds are the Six-Syllable Mantra, all thoughts are the vast primordial wisdom, union of compassion and emptiness.

The generation and completion stage practices in Vajrayāna practices, including *Nyungne* are aimed at overcoming all forms of dualism, especially the extremes of eternalistic belief in a truly existing self and phenomena (theistic view) and the other extreme, i.e. the nihilism, which is the belief that nothing whatsoever exists (atheistic view). Therefore, the ultimate nature of phenomena is neither that of existence or non-existence, but it is empty of inherent existence. Direct realization into the true nature of all phenomena, i.e. the secret *ḍākinī*, the Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* is the goal of *Nyungne*. This makes the *Nyungne* practice a deity yoga practice which culminates in the direct realization of emptiness, free of mental fabrications, dualistic notions, including fixations on gender. Hence, the *Nyungne* practice of Gelongma Palmo which resulted in her enlightenment and which has been practiced by generations of women who also attained high realization also has the flavour of soteriological androgyny. Those who successfully accomplished the *Nyungne* practice, like other Vajrayāna practices, have transcended all forms of dichotomies, and in the case of this thesis, have gained a direct realization of the ultimate irrelevance of gender in the ultimate realm. They have come to understand that women too can become enlightened simply because the ultimate nature of mind is free of all forms of conceptual ideas and mental fabrications which have conjured up the idea of gender and disempowered women, including women in Buddhism. However, in the context of Jachung Karmo, the nuns can at best read the liturgical text and understand the basic meditations, but not the deep and profound meaning behind symbolism. Since these

nuns do not have access to a competent guru, they would largely be unable to penetrate into the depths of the ultimate truth as is the desired outcome for all who practice *Nyungne* and other meditations in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism.

7.3 Feminine Symbolism—Personifications of Wisdom

Whether one is male or female, realizing the secret *ḍākinī*, i.e. is the ultimate nature of mind is the essence of dharma practice in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. The meditational deity, especially in feminine aspect corresponds to the inner *ḍākinī*, i.e. co-emergent wisdom. The inner *ḍākinī* signifies the wisdom-mind as well as the wisdom realizing emptiness. It is for this reason that the practice of the feminine *yidam* is believed to accelerate the wisdom realizing emptiness of the tantric practitioner (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 164-166). Simmer-Brown notes:

The *ḍākinī*, in her various guises, serves as each of the Three Roots. She may be a human guru, a vajra master who transmits the Vajrayāna teachings to her disciples and joins them in samaya commitments. The wisdom *ḍākinī* may be a *yidam*, a meditational deity; female deity yogas such as Vajrayoginī are common in Tibetan Buddhism. Or she may be a protector; the wisdom *ḍākinīs* have the special power and responsibility to protect the integrity of oral transmissions.

7.3.1 Vajrayoginī

Foremost among the female meditational deities is Vajrayoginī and her various manifestations such as Vajravārāhī. Vajrayoginī is "the personification of vajra emptiness"—empty of inherent nature. Vajrayoginī is extensively practiced in Bhutan and many rituals such as the Chöd practice has this female deity as the main meditational deity. Through her ritual¹⁹⁴, i.e. deity yoga, the practitioner discovers that the *ḍākinī* in the aspect of meditational deity "is the spiritual subjectivity of all beings, whether female or male. The *ḍākinī* represents to the practitioner the inner experience of the true nature of the mind and phenomena." (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 177).

¹⁹⁴ In her *sādhana*, she is called "self-born great bliss, the ultimate Mahamudra." She is the realization of nonduality, the inseparability of subject and object, which is great joy (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 177).

How do feminine *yidams* like Vajrayoginī impact female tantric practitioners? A key contributing factor would be the imagery of Vajrayoginī which is steeped in symbolism aimed at orientating the mind towards the realization of the secret *ḍākinī*, our true nature of mind. Vajrayoginī's imagery, more specifically, that of her manifestation Vajravārāhī is described in detail by Simmer-Brown (2002: 166-168) as follows:

The *yidam* Vajrayoginī is visualized in semiwrathful style, fiery red in color because red is the color of Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*. She is naked, with charnel ground ornaments, because she is "untouched by the neurosis of klesas, with no armour of ego to clothe her." Since she dwells in the charnel ground of egocentrism, she stands on the chest and lower face of a decaying corpse. As a wisdom *ḍākinī*, Vajrayoginī carries a hooked knife (*kartari, triguk*) known as the hook of mercy, the weapon of nonthought that cuts the deceptions of self-cherishing. Nonthought (*togme*) is the most basic expression of Vajrayoginī, for her mind is completely free from subconscious chatter and from the habitual patterns that give rise to obsessive thought patterns. Nonthought is a purified form of ignorance or bewilderment, traditionally symbolized in Buddhism by a pig. In this *sādhana*, the *ḍākinī* is secretly known as the Vajra Sow, or Vajravārāhī, for her ignorance is completely transformed into freedom, the wisdom of limitless space. As the *sādhana* praises her, "Your sow's face shows nonthought, the unchanging *dharmakāya*." To remind us of this, Vajrayoginī's loosed and flowing hair partially conceals the head of a sow rising from near her right ear. The nonthought qualities of Vajrayoginī harken to her secret dimensions of nondual wisdom and space, for she has no allegiance to emotional upheavals, interpretations, or habits of any kind. She is completely concentrated on the source of everything (*chojung*), the vast space that is her basic nature, the rootless root of thoughts and emotions. Her three eyes radiate unbiased clarity. In this aspect, she is the vast and limitless mind of the Buddha.

...in her left hand she carries a skull-cup holding liquor that intoxicates concepts into nonthought. Around her neck she wears two seductive garlands, one of fresh red flowers, signifying nonattachment, and one of fifty-one freshly severed heads, each exhibiting a different expression, representing the fifty-one emotional obscurations, which she has cut off before they arise. In her wild dance, she warmly cradles in the crook of her left arm a beautifully fashioned full-length staff (*tse-sum, khatvahga*) with an eightsided shaft, the hidden representation of her consort Cakrasamvara. Without this staff, she is not complete, for the feminine principle is merely one aspect of the realized mind. In her form as wisdom *ḍākinī*, she is never without her staff, which is adorned with an elaborate scarf with two furls, representing the inseparability of the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna teachings. At the top of the staff is a double vajra scepter, below which are impaled three skulls. The bleached skull on top expresses the *dharmakāya*, the rotting head below it the sambhogakāya, and the freshly severed head the *nirmāṇakāya*, showing the inseparability of the three. Vajrayoginī has three eyes that know the past, present, and future, signifying omniscience. The appearance of these eyes is associated with *Prajñāpāramitā*, for wisdom is associated iconographically with eyes. But in her case, as "knower of the past, present and future, she rolls her three furious bloodshot eyes." The eyes of the *yoginī* are said to gaze into fathomless space and to exhibit the qualities of nonthought.

Feminine *yidams* are important that they remind women practitioners that women are embodiment of wisdom. The imagery of Vajravārāhī described above reminds the woman practitioner of her innate wisdom nature and helps the practitioner to cut through worldly limitations of gender. Therefore, if understood in the context of emptiness, the feminine symbols are important skilful means to train the mind of the practitioner, both male and female on the ultimate nature of phenomena. The practitioner eventually discovers the

inherent emptiness and radiant luminosity of the female gender such that all concepts and afflictive emotions, especially attachment to the female form are completely transcended. To view Vajrayoginī or any other feminine *yidam* “as an external savior figure is to misinterpret her and to diminish her significance for the Vajrayāna practitioner.” (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 177).

7.3.2 Tāra

Tāra (Tib: *Drolma*) is a popular patron female Buddha of Tibet and is widely supplicated by men and women in the Himalayan region. The Praises to the Twenty-One Tāras (Tib: *dolchoe*) is the core congregational prayers that nuns in both Jachung Karmo and Jashar Goenpa practice. Some of the nuns I interviewed were also doing the Tāra *sādhana* as their personal practice.

Though practiced by both male and female practitioners, Tāra is especially invoked by female practitioners. Like Vajrayoginī, Tāra is in essence, *Prajñāpāramitā*, the origin or "Mother" of all the buddhas. Tāra is also the activity of all the buddhas and bodhisattvas (Rinpoche, 1999: 95).

Legend¹⁹⁵ has it that Tāra was a very devout princess named Yeshe Dawa (Wisdom Moon) who lived during the dispensation of Drum Sound Buddha¹⁹⁶, in a world called “Multicolored Light” some world cycles ago. She had immense faith in this Buddha and used to make extensive offerings to this Buddha and his entourage of monks. One day, she wanted to take the *bodhisattva* vow from this Buddha in order to become enlightened for the benefit of sentient beings. The monks rejoiced in her aspiration which would generate great merit for her and advised her to dedicate these merits to be reborn in a male body in the next life in order to be fully enlightened. Princess Yeshe Dawa, disturbed by

¹⁹⁵ Retold to us by Tāranatha, a 16th century Tibetan *lama* and historian

¹⁹⁶ Some sources say that it was Buddha Amogāsiddhi

their narrow-mindedness gave a fitting reply to the monks, in accordance with ultimate reality (Rinpoche, 1999: 20):

Here, no man, no woman, no I, no individual, no categories.
"Man" or "woman" are only denominations created by confusion of perverse minds in this world.

She reasoned that since many attained enlightenment in a male body and few in the female form, she vowed to attain enlightenment in a female body (Rinpoche, 1999: 20):

"As for myself," she said, "as long as *samsāra* is not emptied, I will benefit beings appearing in a female body."

When Yeshe Dawa attained enlightenment some world cycles later, she became known as Tāra. Ārya Tāra symbolises enlightenment in the female form and is thus, especially supplicated by female Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners. The more popular forms of Tāra are Green, White Tāra or twenty-one Tāras. Other manifestations of Tāra are Bhrikuti (Tib: *Thronyerchen*), Kurukulla (Tib: *Kurukulle*), Sitatapattra (Tib: *Dukkar*), Ushnishavijaya (Tib: *Namgyalma*), Vishvamata (Tib: *Natsok Yum*, Kalachakra's consort), Naraitma (Tib: *Damema*), etc. Although forms vary, the essence of all feminine deities is the same; they are all *Prajñāpāramitā*, the Perfection of Wisdom (Rinpoche, 1999).

Tāra practice is one of the most common daily prayers recited in almost every monastery and nunnery in the Tibetan cultural area and a source of constant inspiration for Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist practitioners. Many hagiographies and biographies of great masters, both male and female in Bhutan and elsewhere in the Himalayas contain references to Tāra as a source of inspiration. A most notable example of how Tāra had an impact on female practitioners would be Machig Lhabdron. In her past life, she was Śrisūra Ārya, an Indian boy from Kapila, named Arthasiddhi or Dondrup Zangpo. He died at the age of twenty and intentionally took rebirth in a female body to help the people of Tibet. This story has parallels to that of Ārya Tāra who intentionally became enlightened in a female body (Harding, 2003).

Ārya Tāra was very much involved in the life of Machig Lhabdron. Ārya Tāra personally came and bestowed the hundred empowerments from the *Tantra of the Heart's Essence That Clears Away the Darkness of Ignorance* to Machig Lhabdron. Ārya Tāra made the following prophecy about Machig (Harding, 2003: 70):

“You, yogini, will set up the [union of] method and wisdom with a yogin named Topa Bhadra, an emanation of the Buddha Kapala, who will come to Tibet. You will accomplish the welfare of beings in 108 haunted places and lakes. Your doctrine will shine like the sun, and you will reach the level of a nonreturner.” Then she faded away like a rainbow and vanished.

There are conflicting versions in the life story of Machig Lhabdron. She is portrayed both as an emanation of Tāra, Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* and the great *ḍākinī* Yeshe Tsogyal and also an ordinary woman. She is both “The girl from Lap country who excelled at her studies and became Lapdron, literally “the Light of Lap” (Tib: *lab kyi sgron ma*), and the female embodiment of the ultimate feminine principle, Machig, the “One Mother” (Tib: *ma gcig*)” (Harding, 2003: 22). When she was forty-one years old Ārya Tāra, surrounded by her retinue of *ḍākinīs* appeared to her and showered her empowerments. Machig asked Ārya Tāra whether an ordinary woman like herself could be of benefit to sentient beings in any meaningful way. Ārya Tāra replied (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 101):

Yoginī, do not feel discouraged! In the course of previous lives you have studied and mastered the meaning of the scriptures of sutra and tantra. . . . You are a mind emanation of the Great Mother Yum Chenmo: we are inseparable. You are the wisdom *ḍākinī*, the sovereign of the great expanse [*vajradhatu*] and the source of liberation of all phenomena. Don't lose heart. Keep your determination.

Machig protested, wondering how she could be an emanation of Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 101):

How could I possibly be an emanation of the Great Mother, inseparable from you? And in what way am I the source of the liberation of all phenomena? And where is the residence of the Great Mother?

Tāra explained and cleared her doubts (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 107):

Yoginī, although in your innermost heart there is a clear knowledge about the past, listen carefully and I'll explain it to you. The one known as the primordial Mother Yum Chenmo is the ultimate nature of all phenomena, emptiness, the essence of reality [*dharmata*] free from the two veils. She is the pure expanse of emptiness, the knowledge of the non-self. She is the matrix which gives birth to all the buddhas of the three times. However, so as to enable all sentient beings to accumulate

merit, the Great Mother appears as an object of veneration through my aspirations and prayers for the sake of all beings.

Transcending literal interpretations of Ārya Tāra's message, it is clear that Ārya Tāra, when referring to Machig Lhabdron as Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* was using skillful means to facilitate Machig's understanding that her (Machig's) essential nature is that of emptiness, which corresponds to Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*. In the same way, all sentient beings are essentially Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* in nature but due to ignorance, are unable to penetrate into their own true nature of mind. However, some biographies of Machig Lhabdron assert that she was already enlightened, i.e. she was Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* herself who took birth to manifest enlightenment. This, I feel, is a grossly deliberate attempt to playdown the achievements of human women as androcentric biographers often have a problem in accepting that women can be enlightened masters in a female body. This type of interpretation that highly realized females must be a manifestation of *ḍākinī* of sorts disempowers women, implying that enlightenment is beyond the reach of ordinary women. Even the first enlightened Tibetan woman, Yeshe Tsogyal is not spared.

Scholars such as Herrmann-Pfandt (1990) and Campbell (1996) argue that the *ḍākinī* concept exploited women because *ḍākinīs* were almost always associated with living women who are consorts of male practitioners. They further argued that tantric texts do not depict women as “autonomous beings who could use the *ḍākinī* imagery in service of their own liberation” (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 18). These scholars opine that the *ḍākinī* is a patriarchal symbol that guards male privilege and that the human *ḍākinī*'s role is merely to facilitate the male journey to enlightenment. Women are reduced to playing a marginal role in tantric practice as the *ḍākinī* symbol was completely appropriated by the patriarchal system of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism to suit the needs of male practitioners. Campbell (1996) contends that the *ḍākinī* symbol and practices such as Vajrayoginī is particularly damaging for women because it not only erodes women's subjectivity, but diminishes women's ability to be practitioners or teachers in their own right and is

therefore counter-productive for women. However we choose to interpret Ārya Tāra's message to Machig Lhabdron, the most important is to understand that Ārya Tāra made Machig Lhabdron realize her inner potential which subsequently gave rise to her self-confidence in pursuing enlightenment in a female body, which Machig Lhabdron achieved.

Ārya Tāra also had a profound impact on Gelongma Palmo, the founder of the *Nyungne* practice that the Jachung Karmo nuns are so adept at. After having a vision of Ārya Tāra when she was twenty-seven years old, Gelongma attained the first bodhisattva *bhumi*. Ārya Tāra also prophesied that Gelongma Palmo would perform activities of the buddhas of the three times, which gave Gelongma the confidence to continue her practice of Thousand-Armed Chenrezig until she attained enlightenment. Because of their great devotion to Ārya Tāra, both Machig Lhabdron and Gelongma Palmo could see Ārya Tāra and receive teachings, empowerments and prophecies directly from her which greatly encouraged them to persevere on the path to enlightenment and benefit numberless sentient beings. These stories are available to the nuns largely through oral stories because there is no library at Jachung Karmo and the library at Jashar Goenpa was more like a storeroom for prayer material!

7.4 Historical Female Masters—Symbols of Courage of Determination

Religious masters in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism are often depicted as manifestations of the enlightened principle which are aimed at inspiring people. However, this has little value for ordinary practitioners who need to identify with real-life role models who were ordinary people who transcended ordinariness and became enlightened. According to Harding (2003: 22), “The desire to hear the human side of the story is perhaps even more pertinent for the modern reader, who is often doubtful and even scornful of the miraculous depictions typically found in Buddhist hagiography”. Whichever way these masters are

interpreted, either as divine manifestations or ordinary women who later became extraordinary by pursuing the Vajrayāna path, what is important is that these great historical masters left an indelible impact on the lives of generations of practitioners, both male and female.

7.4.1 Yeshe Tsogyal

Yeshe Tsogyal, the great Tibetan *yoginī* holds a special place for women in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, especially those of the Nyingma. Hence, the nuns at Jashar Goenpa are more familiar with her although Yeshe Tsogyal is a national icon because she was the enlightened ‘consort’ of Guru Padmasambhava, the patron saint of Bhutan. Yeshe Tsogyal is not only remembered as a human female master, but she is also a tantric Buddhist meditational deity. Yeshe Tsogyal has numerous manifestations as a meditational deity, such as Sarasvatī¹⁹⁷ (Tib: *Yangchenma*), White Tāra (Tib: *Drolma Karmo*), Vajrayoginī or Vajravārāhī, who are two aspects of the most important *ḍākinī* in the Tibetan tantric system (Simmer-Brown, 2002). Yeshe Tsogyal is deeply revered and supplicated in tantric rituals. An example of supplication in her ritual from the *Longchen Nyingthik* tradition (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 89):

In the center of that palace,
Upon the pistil of a blooming lotus
On a sun-seat is the chief of the *ḍākinīs*,
[Who is] Samantabhadri in the vast expanse of *dharmakāya*,
Vajravārāhī in the field of *sambhogakāya* and
Yeshe Tsogyal in the form of *nirmāṇakāya*

Yeshe Tsogyal’s life story is a poignant example of a young woman struggling desperately against the social pressures of her time. Her father, who knew very well of his daughter’s spiritual inclinations and maturity insisted on her marriage. In her bid to escape marriage, she was subjected to severe brutality. She was brutally raped by her first

¹⁹⁷ the great female bodhisattva of learning, culture, and music, the peaceful consort of Manjusri. It is said that Yeshe Tsogyal was Sarasvatī in her previous life.

suitor and fought off the second. When she fled from the latter, she was taken and placed in King Trisong Deutsen's harem who later offered her as a consort to Guru Padmasambhava. The verse below is Yeshe Tsogyal's account to Guru Padmasambhava of the trials and tribulations she had to face as a female who deeply aspired to pursue the spiritual path (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: xxx):

I am a timid woman and of scant ability; of lowly condition, the butt of everyone. If I go for alms, I am set upon by dogs; if food and riches come my way, I am the prey of thieves; since I am beautiful, I am the quarry of every lecherous knave; if I am busy with much to do, the country folk accuse me; if I don't do what they think I should, the people criticize; if I put a foot wrong, everyone detests me. I have to worry about everything I do. That is what it is like to be a woman! How can a woman possibly gain accomplishment in Dharma? Just managing to survive is already hard enough.

Many women, even today, can deeply identify with the suffering that Yeshe Tsogyal endured. However, Yeshe Tsogyal's story is not one of resignation and despair. On the contrary, she proved that women in dire situations can turn their lives around and not only transcend their unfortunate circumstances but attain high spiritual realizations on the spiritual path. In a contrasting song of victory by Yeshe Tsogyal after attaining enlightenment, she replaced her bitter recriminations about the taunts she faced in the past with mild humour (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: xxxi):

Your "Lady," wild and fit for any deed,
To whom so many things befell, is now no more!
The wench who could not even keep her man
Is now the queen of *Dharmakāya* Kuntuzangpo!
That sluttish creature, brazen with conceit,
Pretension takes her now away to the southwest!
That whining vixen, fit for any intrigue,
Has tricked her way to dissolution in the Dharmadhatu!
That dejected widow no Tibetan wanted
Inherits now the endless sovereignty of Buddhahood!

Due to her amazing attainments, she became guru to scores of disciples in the Himalayan region, both men and women, lay and monastic. Among her notable female disciples were Trashi Chidren, Kalasiddhi, Shelkar Dorje Tso, Lodro Kyi and the innumerable nuns of the monasteries that Tsogyal founded and supported (Simmer-Brown, 2002).

An example of the impact Yeshe Tsogyal had on her female disciples is from a verse by Trashi Chidren, from Mon¹⁹⁸, who pleaded with Yeshe Tsogyal not to pass into *parinirvāna* (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: 170):

Mother, Lady, full of grace and love,
Alone the mother of all beings in the triple world,
If you no longer guard your children,
Only those who know to feed themselves will manage to survive.
How shall pink-mouthed, toothless babes not perish?
You, the great, the golden ornament of heaven,
If you no longer drive away the gloom of beings' minds,
Only those who have the wisdom eye will find their way,
While those with normal sight will fall into the depths.

Kalasiddhi from Nepal who upon learning that Yeshe Tsogyal was about to pass into *parinirvāna* made many prostrations and circumambulations, requested the great master to remain in Tibet and not to pass into nirvana (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: 172):

Ah, Mother,
When you have withdrawn into the womb of space,
How shall they fare who practice the deep path of Mantrayana in Tibet?
Who will scatter obstacles and nurture progress?
Continue to protect Tibet with loving mercy!

Another female disciple, Dorje Tsomo of Shelkar, unable to bear the impending departure of Yeshe Tsogyal pleaded with the great master to take her along to the pureland or at the very least leave her some instructions. So profound was her grief over her guru's passing away that she fainted in despair (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: 180):

Kyema!
Mother of this whole Tibetan kingdom,
Mistress specially of me, who trust in you.
No other will there be for me if you depart.
Have mercy on me, do not cast me off.
Take me with you to the land of Lotus Light!
But if, too laden with my heavy deeds,
I cannot follow in your footsteps,
Grant, I beg you, teachings and instructions in abundant measure.
Her voice was shaken with weeping and she fainted away in despair.

Shelkar Dorje Tsomo went on to become a famous *yoginī* and consort with Namkhai Nyingpo, one of the most renowned disciples of Guru Rinpoche (Simmer-Brown, 2002:

¹⁹⁸ Present-day Bhutan

230). A thousand three hundred years later, the teachings of Yeshe Tsogyal continue to have positive impact on practitioners in Bhutan as her stories are retold to younger generations in the form of oral stories. However, the accuracy of the oral stories compared with the actual biography is severely compromised and tainted with more androcentric biasness. Moreover, many of these oral stories are no longer being transmitted to the younger generation, as is clearly the case from the nuns I interviewed who only know bits and pieces of Yeshe Tsogyal's life story.

7.4.2 Machig Lhabdron

Machig Lhabron, the great female adept who founded the Chöd practice is also popular among women practitioners in my study areas and throughout Bhutan, actually. Machig Lhabdron is best remembered for founding the lineage of Chöd practice in Tibet (one of the eight transmission lineages of Tibet). Chöd is a powerful practice which involves "cutting through the ego." This practice remains popular throughout Tibet, Mongolia and the Indian Himalayas up to the present day (Karma Drubgyu Thargay Ling, 2012).

Machig Lhabdron was inspired primarily by the *Prajñāpāramitā*, the Great Mother Perfection of Wisdom, the secret *ḍākinī*. She was different than other great female adepts of Tibet because "she was not a lama's consort, a nun, or a hermit, but a mother who nurtured the spiritual life of her children, and a self-styled beggar woman" (Harding, 2003: 22). She was also a master of *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*. She is the only Tibetan to have directly founded a transmission lineage which would be transmitted back to India, a cause for great national pride in Tibet (Harding S. , 2003).

Like Yeshe Tsogyal, apart from her human dimension, Machig Lhabdron is revered as tantric Buddhist meditational deity. Machig Lhabdron is synonymous with Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*. According to Harding (2003: 33), "In the various rites of Chöd in every

tradition into which it was assimilated, Machig is envisioned, or revisioned, surrounded by the Great Mother, Vajrayoginī, and a retinue of *ḍākinīs* and buddhas.

Her body is white as a conch shell,
With one face and two hands,
Her right hand plays a golden drum in the sky.
The left supports a silver bell at her hip.
Her three eyes gaze into space.
Her hair is bound atop her head,
The rest flowing free down her back,
Her naked body adorned with bones and jewels,
With right leg flexed and the left straight—she dances.”

Machig Lhabdron, like Yeshe Tsogyal was indeed a woman who rose above social norms that constrict women’s spiritual progress and relegate them to a lower status in society. Machig transcended all these man-made social limitations and manifested her realization of Mother *Prajñāpāramitā* in a manner which not only challenged women’s traditional norms, but also established women in new roles as teachers and lineage founders of their own right.

Machig’s birth story parallels that of Ārya Tāra who purposely took birth in a female form in order to be enlightened. Indeed, Machig, in her former life was an Indian master named Arthasiddha (Tib: *Dondrup Zangpo*) who took birth in a female body considered inferior by both Indians and Tibetans. Moreover, taking birth in Tibet, known as the land of red-faced demons was an added challenge.

Like many female masters, Machig Lhabdron is thought to be a divine manifestation, a *ḍākinī* who ‘manifested’ enlightenment in order to tame sentient beings. As discussed earlier, if a woman were to display remarkable intellect and great realizations, she was almost always portrayed as a *ḍākinī*, as it would seem beyond the reach of an ordinary woman, one of low-birth to be spiritually accomplished. I cite an example (Harding, 2003: 78):

Machik departed early in the morning and by midday had arrived at Sheldrong. A teacher there named Sherab Bum, a great scholar of the canon, was in the process of explicating the *pāramitās* to about three hundred monastics when Machik arrived. The geshe all said, “Jomo, aren’t you the famous Lapdron, Dawa Gyaltzen’s daughter with three eyes? Are you the one?” “I am,” she replied. “Well, then, you are well known for being a *ḍākinī* and a master of the *pāramitās*. Let’s have a

dharma debate!” “Very well,” said Machik, and debated with the seven most famous geshe. But the geshe found no opportunity to defeat her, and all of the monks said that it must indeed be true that she was an actual wisdom *dākinī*, an emanation of the Great Mother.

These types of hagiographies which are usually written posthumously by male masters with the aim of elevating her status to that of a goddess is counter-productive to the ordinary woman who yearns to identify with an ordinary human. Women who revere Machig Lhabdron appreciate both her human and divine attributes and draw inspiration from her and have tremendously benefited from her Chöd practice.

In her biography, when Machig was fifty-six years old, she called for a large gathering for a *gaṇacakra* feast. This feast was attended by “113 women and nuns, including the four daughters named Gyaltsen Ne, Sonam Gyaltsen, Palden Gyen, and Bumtso Rinchen Gyen. In addition, there were 150 monks, principally Shamar, and 150 laymen.” (Harding, 2003: 103). This demonstrates that one third of her disciples were women and that even monks and laymen took teachings from her.

In another section of her biography, it is mentioned that she had a large number of disciples from various walks of life and from various part in Tibet and her fame spread even to India. Among these disciples were women, including nuns, thus affirming that Machig did indeed have impact on women practitioners in Tibet (Harding, 2003: 92):

Machig had a vast number of disciples. They came from Amdo, Central Tibet, and Kham: everyone from important lamas with parasols, to geshe and monks, to the popular kings, ministers, chiefs, queens, and even Mongols, to nuns and lay men and women, even down to lepers and beggars. [Her place] became the meeting ground of all manner of fortune and the resting place of all kinds of disaster. Machig was always surrounded by about five thousand people of good or ill fortune. Many people even came from Nepal to meet her. The reputation of her merit and teachings became known even in India.

The more contemporary A-yu Khandro was inspired by the teachings of Machig Lhabdron and lived the life of a Chödpa for many years (Simmer-Brown, 2002). A-yu Khandro passed away in 1953 at a ripe-old age of one hundred and fourteen years in her hermitage in East Tibet and attained the Rainbow Body. After her death, it is said she remained in meditation for two weeks and by the end of the two weeks her body had

shrunk to a fraction of its original size, a sign of her accomplishment of Dzogchen practice. Therefore, the life stories of great female masters continue to inspire generations of female practitioners well into the twentieth-century, bringing out the best in them and in the case of A-yu Khandro, attainment of realizations as promised by Machig Lhabdron for all those who practice the path shown by her. However, as is the case with the nuns in both nunneries studied, they have no access to Machig Lhabdron's biography due to the absence of a decent library and their poor literacy in Tibetan, Dzongkha and English hinders their ability to access these materials. Whatever little that the nuns know is from oral stories, often told by *lamas* in a piecemeal manner.

7.4.3 Bhikṣuṇī Lakshmi (Gelongma Palmo)

Gelongma Palmo (see Figure 12, p.314) is by far one of the most important and highly esteemed female masters in the Tibetan cultural area. Gelongma, who was an Indian princess, as already discussed in Chapter Five, is an icon of liberation from suffering for women and is especially revered by nuns. Gelongma Palmo is the sole woman depicted in hagiographies dedicated to the transmission lineages of the *Nyungne* fasting practices. Gutschow (2004: 64) asserts that “in terms of the textual tradition, at least, it was men who claimed authority of transmission.”

However, the *Nyungne* fasting practice associated with the Thousand-Armed Chenrezig were important women's practices in seventeenth century Tibet. Gutschow (2004: 65) cites a survey of Gandenpa monasteries compiled at the end of the seventeenth century by Sangye Gyatso mentions that *Nyungne* was regularly practiced in several nunneries. Gutshow (2004: 107) cites further examples of *Nyungne* practice in various other places:

This fasting ritual appears to have been as important in late-seventeenth- century Dolpo [referring to the nun Orgyan Chokyi] as it is today throughout the Himalaya. From the Everest region of Nepal, where Sherpas routinely engage in fasting rites, to the high mountains of Ladakh and Zanskar in northern India, where fasting is an important feature of nuns' ritual practice, the tradition of fasting tracing back to Gelongma Palmo is ubiquitous.

Despite the great popularity of Gelongma Palmo's *Nyungne* ritual, there is almost no biographical information on its founder, Gelongma Palmo in religious texts (Gutschow, 2004). Nevertheless, the story of Gelongma Palmo has been "retold throughout the Tibetan regions of the Nepal Himalayas by such women manipas, or storytellers, as Jetsün Lochen Rinpoche" (Schaeffer, 2004: 62). Gelongma Palmo's story of being cured of leprosy through the *Nyungne* practice continues to be a selling point in attracting new practitioners. Gelongma Palmo's legacy, the great purification power of the *Nyungne* fasting practice continues to be a favourite practice amongst Himalayan Buddhist nuns.

Gelongma's story not only demonstrates that the power of faith and devotion in Thousand-Armed Chenrezig can result in great purification to the point of restoration of limbs, but also results in attainment of full enlightenment. Indeed, unlike other great female masters who attained enlightenment through the consort practice, Gelongma attained buddhahood on her own, while keeping her monastic vows intact. This is an immense inspiration to Buddhist nuns on the path to enlightenment who practice vows of celibacy and need role models who have actualized enlightenment through purity of body. Sahle Aui of Nyanang, Tibet, Milarepa's student also demonstrated that she could become enlightened without needing a consort (Stevens, 1990). Moreover, Gelongma Palmo was a fully-ordained nun, a privilege which Himalayan Buddhist nuns do not have as full-ordination is not available to Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist nuns, right up to the present day.

Gelongma Palmo also demonstrated the hardships that women have to face on the spiritual path. Gelongma Palmo, like Princess Mandarava refused to be forced into marriage. She renounced her royal position and left her family to be ordained as a Buddhist nun. Once, Gelongma, whose knowledge in Buddhism and skill in debate was unparalleled, defeated three Buddhist experts, "a scholar (Tib: *dge bshes*), a Tantricist (Tib: *sngags pa*), and a meditator (Tib: *sgom pa*)." (Gutschow, 2004: 96). According to

traditional narratives cited by Gutschow (2004: 97):

“Most of the monks who were present there were astonished and prostrated in recognition of Gelongma Palmo's accomplishments, those that did not, went straight to hell: Chattering fools...who disparage women out of hostility, Will by that evil action remain constantly tortured. For three eons in the fathomless Raudra hell, Wailing as their bodies burn in many fires”.

Gelongma Palmo's story above is a traditional reminder to tantric practitioners to not disparage women. The monks judged Gelongma's worth not by her intellect, but based on her being female, whose body is “impure and vulnerable”. Gelongma, eventually silenced all critics at a Buddhist festival who doubted her enlightened status just because she was female. This story is an inspiration to generations of Himalayan Buddhist women that the female body is no barrier to enlightenment (Gutschow, 2004: 97).

In the context of the Bhutanese nuns, I observed during my fieldwork that powerful female imagery like Gelongma Palmo and Tāra have had a profound psychological impact on these nuns as these feminine figures inspire nuns to practice dharma sincerely against tremendous hardships. From humble beginnings and lacking self-confidence, the nuns at Jachung Karmo have developed a female dharma in less than three decades and have become well-known as authentic practitioners of *Nyungne* in Western Bhutan. These nuns have become relevant to the lives of the people whom they are closely connected with. Female imagery has helped these nuns to become leaders and masters in their desired spiritual practice. The *Nyungne* practice based on an inspiring female personality has empowered these nuns and given them a distinct identity and importance in Punakha.



Figure 7.1: An embroidered thangka depicting Gelongma Palmo at Jachung Karmo Nunnery¹⁹⁹

7.5 Invisible Female Rinpoches: "Yes...they truly exist"

We have seen thus far how the patriarchal religious institution run by male clergy in Bhutan has systematically denied women equal rights to religious education and kept them in a low position in society. Another dimension of patriarchal forces at play in the Bhutanese religious scenario is the lack of recognition of female masters. I have just demonstrated the positive impact of symbolism and hagiographies of enlightened females in the preceding sections. However, in the Bhutanese context, hagiographies or even simple biographies of women are rare. Compared with the illustrious male personalities discussed in Chapter Three, not a single female master has been mentioned in the religious history of Bhutan (Phuntsho, 2013). Simmer-Brown, (2002: 222) put forth her own thesis on why great female adepts have been omitted from history:

Generally it may be observed that Tibet has many highly accomplished *yoginīs* in its history, some of whom have had a few students. But few of them have achieved the rank of tantric gurus of renown. This accounts for the dearth of *yoginī* lineage stories in the Tibetan tradition, for it is the students of great teachers who compile their gurus' biographies. But when great *yoginīs* have been

¹⁹⁹ Source: Fieldwork (2012)

discouraged from taking students or giving empowerments, their stories become mere rumors. Scholars such as Hanna Havnevik have noted it is difficult to begin collecting the stories of great *yoginīs* because very few are remembered by Tibetan monastic or lay people, and few Western scholars have given this task priority.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no biographies or hagiographies (Tib: *rnam-thar*) of highly realized Bhutanese female personalities, giving the skewed impression that Bhutanese women are devoid of any spiritual maturity and are incapable of attaining high realizations on the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist path. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Yet another facet of patriarchy in the Vajrayāna tradition, be it Bhutan or Tibet is the *trulku* system. Simmer-Brown (2002: 141) asserts that the reason why the *trulku* tradition is patriarchal because “women *trulkus* and lineage holders are rare”. She added that Vajrayāna is in actual fact less patriarchal than mainstream Mahāyāna which contains certain teachings that emphasise the necessity of a male body as the only valid vessel for attaining enlightenment. The Vajrayāna teachings acknowledge that “trulkus would sometimes choose the female body for rebirth and continue their compassionate activity as women” (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 141).

As such, female realized masters, including *trulkus*, do exist in Bhutan. During my fieldwork, I chanced upon at least two highly realized female masters. One is Anim Lopenma Paldon, the late abbess of the Jachung Karmo Nunnery and the other, Anim Trulku, the reincarnation of the founder of Jashar Goenpa. The life stories of Anim Lopenma Paldon and Anim Woesel Chöden are still not available in any religious literature in Bhutan. I present, in this section, their life stories as I heard them from their direct disciples and relatives, stories which have not been told elsewhere that have inspired both female and male practitioners they were associated with.

7.5.1 Lopenma Paldon—Longest Serving Abbess

Jamyang Chöden, better known as Anim Lopenma Paldon (see Figure 7.2, p.319) or simply, Anim Lopen was the longest serving abbess of the Jachung Karmo nunnery, from 1951-1976 and then again from 1986-1999. She was also entrusted by the Dratshang Lhentshog to take care of two other nunneries, the Kila Goenpa in Paro and the Sha Phetse Goenpa in Wangdi Phodrang.

Despite the fact that she lived in the twentieth century, precious little is known of her life history. No one took the initiative to pen down her life history when she was alive, although many other life stories of male religious personalities of her era and before are well-recorded. She was not an obscure personality. In fact, she was well-known in Western Bhutan to the general public, the monastic body and even the royal family. The only biographical information available of her is piecemeal, compiled by her main disciples, one of whom is Lopen Tenzin Dema, who still resides at Jachung Karmo. Most of her life history is lost due to androcentric tendencies in recording the history of religious personalities in Bhutan which have consistently neglected female masters over the centuries. A concise life story of Anim Lopen was published in 2013 by Bhikṣuṇī Tsultrim Wangmo after I conducted my fieldwork in 2012. The following is a combined life story from Wangmo (2013) with field data narratives from Lopen Tenzin Dema:

Anim Paldon was born in 1926 as the only daughter to an aristocratic family. Her mother was the Ashi (Queen) Deki of Kurtoe in Lhuntse, Eastern Bhutan and her father, an attendant to His Majesty the King Jigme Wangchuk, the second king of Bhutan. He was from Paro, Western Bhutan. She had two brothers, both of whom passed away before her. She did not attend formal schooling as girls of her era still had no access to secular education. Nonetheless, she was extremely fortunate to have received private tutorship at home to study all the fundamental scriptures and grammar in Tibetan-Dzongkha. She was also skilled at writing poetry (Wangmo T., 2013). Her brothers studied in the monastery as boys of her time and generations before her did. Female children were not allowed to study in the monastery. Thus, only privileged families could afford to give education to their daughters.

As with most Bhutanese people of her time, Anim Paldon's family were devout Buddhists and instilled deep religious values in their children from an early age. It is not known when and where Anim Paldon became a nun. The earliest known religious milestone in her life is at age thirteen when she did her preliminary practice retreat (as explained earlier in this chapter). By her mid-twenties, she had completed the three-year or *losum chusum* retreat not once, but twice, under the guidance of Lopen Tsam Metok Pelzang at Nalanda, near Talo, Punakha. According to Wangmo (2013), towards the end of her six-year retreat, the *torma* (ritual cake) offered at Anim Lopen's altar in her retreat house turned new. This is generally a sign of a practitioner's attainment of high realizations.

Upon completion of her six years retreat, she took instructions on the Six Yogas of Naropa (Tib: *naro choedrug*) under her master Lama Sonam Zangpo in Hongtso Tashigang, Thimphu district and also under her master Drupthob Tsam Kelzang. Lama Sonam Zangpo, commonly known as Meme Lama, was requested to confer the *naro choedrug* to a group of monks and nuns. There were eight nuns in the same batch as Anim Lopenma. During my interview with Lopen Dawa Gyeltshen, an ex-Lopen Tse of the Zhung Dratshang, who was in the same batch as Anim Lopenma, he said that Anim Lopenma was by far, the most outstanding student in the practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa, far surpassing the rest of her peers, even the monks! He narrated a real incident which to him happened during their practice decades ago:

One day, one of the monks requested for further instructions from their master, Lama Sonam Zangpo. The *lama* told us monks to perfect our practice of Naro Choedrug first, and even if we are incapable of perfecting the practice, to at least be at par with the person whose tooth relic *lama* held in his hand. When the monk students asked whose tooth relic it was, the master said it is a tooth relic of Anim Lopenma Paldon as she was an accomplished master of the Six Yogas of Naropa. This proves that she had achieved high realizations way before she was reappointed Abbess of Jachung Karmo Nunnery in 1986.

Due to her extensive learning, she was appointed the abbess or Lopenma of Jachung Karmo Nunnery at the young age of twenty-five. There, she started the Nyungne fasting practice of Gelongma Palmo (Thousand-armed Chenrezig practice). Anim Lopenma completed 2000 sets of Nyungne in her entire lifetime.

One day, upon completion of one thousand sets of Nyungne practices, she was invited to the Nalanda Monastery to lead a Nyungne prayer. When presiding over the prayers, many people witnessed the holy water vase on the shrine overflowing. The altar attendant monk emptied the vase to half and put it back on the shrine but the process continued for several times. Wondering why this incidence occurred, the monks and laypeople approached the Head Lama of the monastery and asked about it. The Lama responded that it is indeed a mark of her significant achievement from the Nyungne practice, manifested in the form of a miracle to for the benefit of the people.

During her tenure as abbess of Jachung Karmo from 1951 until her demise in 1999, she trained her nuns to concentrate only on the Nyungne fasting practice. Lopenma retired as abbess of Jachung Karmo at age fifty in 1976 after appointing nun Pekar Wangmo as a new Lopenma (abbess) of the nunnery, having served Jachung Karmo as abbess for twenty-five years. Since then, she spent her time meditating in various holy places, caves and even cremation grounds. She also practiced in the high open mountains with her few young nuns though she had a retreat house in Hongtso Tashigang, Thimphu.

During her years of meditation, Anim Lopenma had many cattle which she had to personally tend to because her nuns disciples were too young to do the job. Lopen Ugyen Dema, an old student of Anim Lopenma who has been with her master since she was six years old remembers some events in her life with Anim Lopenma:

I accompanied Anim Lopenma together with another young nun in the deep forest practicing meditation. We used to take our cows along and let them roam freely throughout the day. We used to take the herd back to our hut in the evening after a full day of grazing. One evening, we found that our cow fell into a crevice on a high mountain and broke its leg. The other nun and I tried to help Anim Lopenma to take it out but failed as we were small and inexperienced.

Lopenma could not do it alone. So she spent the entire night with her cow so that the wild animals would not harm or eat it up. In the morning we went to find some people to help us rescue the cow. We had to clean its wound everyday and nurse it back to health. Such was her compassion for sentient beings. Sometimes in certain caves we had no water to cook food during our retreat and had to go through so many difficulties. I was just learning to read and did not know how to meditate but Lopenma would practice quietly and secretly... away from us.

When she served as abbess, Anim Lopenma was often summoned to the Thimphu Royal Palace by Ashi Kesang Wangmo, the Queen Mother of the fourth king. She was also a favourite of the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuk. Lopen Tenzin Dema, who used to faithfully follow her teacher everywhere, had the rare opportunity to visit the royal palace. Lopenma Paldon had two nannies that took care of her when she was small. So she repaid their kindness by taking charge of their welfare in their old age. One was staying in Motithang near the royal palace in Thimphu and Tenzin Dema was sent to live with her for a few months to take care of her. The other was brought to Guma Gonpa, on the way to Jachung Karmo nunnery from Punakha. She could not stay at Jachung Karmo because of poor eyesight and the climb was too steep for the aged lady.

Lopenma was re-appointed abbess of Jachung Karmo Nunnery in the summer of 1986 by His Majesty the fourth King via the monastic body, Zhung Dratshang after the nunnery fell into neglect through mismanagement. By the royal command, the Anim Lopenma and her group of twenty-five nuns were given a royal escort in a traditional procession called *sedra*, accorded only to dignitaries in Bhutan. The *sedra* procession consisted of Pa Cham dancers wearing the traditional crown called *ri-nga* accompanied by musicians playing the traditional musical instruments and a host of villagers and important officials, both religious and secular, all the way up to the nunnery. This type of honour was the first of its kind accorded to nuns in the living memory of the Bhutanese people. Lopen Tenzin Dema is convinced that the fourth King bestowed the honour in recognition of Anim Lopenma as a highly realized practitioner and her service to the nunnery as abbess where Jachung Karmo flourished till she relinquished her post.

Since then, Anim Lopenma spent her whole life in the nunnery with short visits to Ashi Kesang Wangmo in the palace. She was so well-versed in poetry that when in doubt about certain aspects of her spiritual practice, she used to compose poems seeking answers to her lingering doubts from great masters of her time such as the previous Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche who would also reply through poems and idioms. Some of the learned government monks heard about her uniqueness in poetry and tested her with exchange of letters and they were proved by her in the same way.

From 1986-1999, Lopenma Paldon had once again raised the image of the Jachung Karmo nuns in the eyes of the local communities as sincere and good practitioners of Nyungne. The local communities had benefited from Nyungne since Anim Lopenma set foot in the nunnery in 1951 and held Anim Lopenma in high esteem. By springtime of 1999, Lopenma, then already seventy-one years old was in poor health. One day, she asked her nuns to move her hut to Darshing Gang, a spot about two hundred meters from Jachung Karmo nunnery. This spot is notorious amongst the local people for high spirit activity as just slightly above, was a cremation ground. Lopen Ugyen Dema said that many people have experienced disturbances from unseen beings at this spot. If one were to make a loud noise in this area, one would most certainly be able to hear or feel the presence of paranormal activity. Yet, during her twenty-five years as abbess of the nunnery, she often used to sleep and practice in her hut which she constructed right on that spot. In fact she began her practice of Nyungne for the deceased ancestors of generous donors while living in this hut.

After few nights of her stay there, she fell ill and had to be brought back to the nunnery. She suffered for two to three months with frequent bleeding from her mouth and nose. She was also plagued with severe headaches as a result of excessive intake of medication since her youth. One summer morning in 1999, Lopen Ugyen Dema recalls that the weather was perfect with beautiful sunshine, birds chirping everywhere and the nuns were in the temple doing their morning prayers. Although she was the one who would care for her teacher, Ugyen Dema was not with Anim Lopenma that morning as she had to attend to some work. She asked one of the young nuns to be with Anim Lopenma and then...

Just before the morning congregational prayers, a young nun came running and said that Lopenma wanted to see me urgently. I ran to her room and to my horror I saw blood everywhere oozing out from her mouth and nose. Anim Lopenma looked at me and asked me to change her position, turning her head towards the eastern direction. With the help of some nuns I helped her to change the position. After that she told us that her body should not be taken anywhere other than Darshing Gang where she spent many of her years in the nunnery. All the nuns sat around her and chanted prayers for her recovery but the same night there was a terrible rainfall and she passed away— it was the 19th of the third lunar month in 1999. The heavy rainfall could be from our crying and wailing for her.

The story clearly indicates that Anim Lopenma was a highly realized woman. This is because throughout the history of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, great masters are known to be adepts in poetry as their high spiritual realizations have given them the ability of spontaneous expression. This was seen in female enlightened masters such as Gelongma Palmo, Yeshe Tsogyal and Machig Lhabdron who composed their texts in poetic form (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002; Harding, 2003; Wangchen, 2009).

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There were fifteen resident nuns during Anim Lopenma's demise although there were twenty of us in total as five had gone home or went out for some nunnery work. Immediately, after Anim Lopenma took her last breath, the nuns had to break into groups to go and inform various people and to seek guidance as we had no idea about how to arrange a funeral. That very night, two nuns proceeded to Pang Karpo monastery to invite Lopen Karma Jungney and two nuns went to Punakha to call Lopenma's nephew who lives in Wangdi Phodrang, a one and half hour drive from Punakha. Both groups managed to reach their destinations only the next morning as the path was rough and long, full of leeches, without even so much as a torch to shine their path.

As per her last wish, Anim Lopenma was cremated at Darshing Gang, a stone's throw away from the nunnery. Her funeral arrangements were made with the help of the *lamas* and the Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) despatched by the royal family. On the final day, Lama Karma Jungney and the Dorji Lopen (Vajra Master) of the Monastic Body presided over the funeral rites along with monks from the Norbugang Monastery. Lama Karma Jungney and some members of the RBA stayed on in the nunnery until the 49 days prayer was over.

The nunnery built a stupa or *chorten* for Anim Lopenma at the cremation site housing her relics, as a fitting tribute to their beloved realized master. This is the only lasting recognition of Anim Lopenma’s spiritual prowess, her legacy deemed unworthy of mention in androcentric writings in recent publications of the religious history of Bhutan.



Figure 7.2: Anim Lopenma Paldon, the late Abbess of Jachung Karmo Nunnery²⁰⁰

7.5.2 Anim Woesel Chöden —Founder of Jashar Goenpa

The biography of Anim Woesel Chöden is a first-hand account from her living disciples. It is a story of inspiration for thousands of Bhutanese women who have been culturally conditioned to view *trulkus* as male. Here, in the remote corner of Bhutan is her highly accomplished reincarnation, awaiting recognition as a ‘precious one’ or Rinpoche. Her ability to recollect her past lives surpasses that of many modern-day male *trulkus*. With all humility, I present this amazing *trulku*’s previous incarnation’s life story:

²⁰⁰ Source: Personal photographs shared by Bhikṣuṇī Tsultrim Wangmo in 2012.

Anim Woessel Chöden was born in 1921 in Zobel Gewog, Pema Gatshel and lived until 1982. She was a highly realized dharma practitioner and founder of Jashar Goenpa. Anim Woessel Chöden was of mixed parentage, her mother a Bhutanese and father, from Eastern Tibet—Khampa Drupa. He was a Drupthob¹ so the local children used to tease Anim Woessel Chöden as the daughter of *Bodpa Changlo* or *Khampa Changlo*, meaning wandering Tibetan. According to Pema Yangden, Anim Woessel Chöden's father used to practice in a cave in Zobel. It is believed that a Dredmo (Yeti) used to bring him groceries for his sustenance as he helped this animal when it was suffering from a thorn-prick in its feet.

Anim Woessel Chöden followed her father's footsteps and was deeply interested in dharma practice since she was a little girl. She put in much effort in her spiritual practice, even going into jungles teeming with wild animals to practice. However, the jungles were soon cleared for settlement and she had to find herself a new place to practice. The new place where she went to practice is known as Goenpa Singma, meaning 'new temple' because she moved from one part of the village to practice to a newer location. From there she went to another three places before settling in Jashar Goenpa where she established a practice centre and lived till her last breath. As Pema Yangden narrated:

In the beginning Anim Woessel Chöden lived in Goenpa Singma, not far from her village, Zobel. Goenpa Singma was at that time full of trees and wild animals but later people started coming one by one and settled there because they learnt that the animals did not harm Anim, so they too wanted to live near her to escape from wild animals. Then she moved to nearby Bruphung to find solitude but there too she was not allowed by the local goddess called Am Jomo who told her, "*When you stay here many people will come to you and this will make my place dirty and polluted. So you please move to another place.*" Then she moved to a place above Yongla monastery which is about 9 km above the present Jashar nunnery. There too she was repeatedly disturbed by the local protector Tseringma, citing the same reason as Am Jomo. When Anim ignored Tseringma, the protector and her retinue started disturbing her in various ways; during her meditation sleep and even while she was awake. Once, while in meditation, Tseringma's five *Dākinīs* came to her retreat hut. Then the three of them stood outside of the hut while two entered her house and laughed out aloud when she was meditating. One of them laid her face down on Anim's lap to disturb her concentration. Anim slowly moved her hand towards the *dākinī*'s nose and grabbed it hard. It then suddenly disappeared. After being shown many signs of displeasure by Tseringma and her retinue at her remaining to live there, Anim finally decided to leave the place. When she was looking down from her retreat hut to see where is the best place for her to move next, she saw a spot with a rainbow and thought, "*That might be the perfect place for me to meditate*". So she looked at that direction for a few consecutive mornings and each time she saw a rainbow at the same spot and thought it best to build a temple and a retreat house there.

She founded the temple in 1958 and named the temple Jashar Woong meaning the Ground of Rising Rainbow. Anim Woessel Chöden lived almost her entire life as a *tse tsam* (lifelong retreat) with a retinue of disciples; comprising monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen.

She learnt several meditation techniques from many great masters of her time; the most significant of them was Togden Shakya Shri, the reincarnation of Drubchen Saraha, who is also Trulku Gyeltshen's previous incarnation. Togden Shakya Shri had many disciples and among his numerous students, nine were considered to be very learned. According to a Jashar nun Pema Yangden, when Anim Woessel Chöden initially practiced the Six Yogas of Naropa, she faced much hostility from her male batchmates saying that "*you are a woman and a Tibetan and you cannot do as we can*". Anim Woessel Chöden turned out to be among the nine best students of Togden Shakya Shri in all practices and she especially excelled in the Six Yogas of Naropa, silencing all her critics!

Anim Woessel Chöden was a renowned *tshampa*, i.e. a person who lived almost her whole life in retreat. After she established Jashar Anim Goenpa, she went into a lifelong retreat. For this reason she was known as Anim *tse tshampa* (Nun of lifelong retreat). She was a much sought-after teacher that even when she was in lifelong retreat where face-to-face communication with people is prohibited, she still gave religious instructions to her disciples through a small opening of her retreat hut window. Her disciples could only hear her voice, but could never see her face.

Anim Woessel Chöden is said to have possessed supernormal powers as many of her students claim that they have seen her in different forms like birds, fruits etc. Once, she went out in the form of a bird to observe her students going for almsrounds. Also, some of her disciples claimed that when she was in meditation practicing in complete darkness, lights rays used to emit from her body.

It is believed that many high *lamas* in Bhutan used to visit Anim Woesel Chöden. One of her students is Lama Jangchub, the founder of Woesel Chöling nunnery, better known as Chödphu Goenpa. Lama Gyeltshen who founded Gayri Ugyen Phunstsho Chöling Nunnery was another student of Anim Woesel Chöden. He is now in lifelong retreat. The current Dorji Lopen of Jashar Goenpa, Anim Kunzang Wangmo, is another disciple of Anim Woesel Chöden. An old student of Anim Woesel Chöden shared with me:

Once the whole village had some misunderstanding that China was about to attack Bhutan like it did in Tibet and entire villages fled Bhutan for India. Anim Woesel Chöden ran away from the nunnery and was later found in Darjeeling, India. During that time most of her nun students disobeyed and lay followers also left the nunnery.

When Anim Woesel Chöden passed away, it snowed with the snowflakes falling out of the sky like a flower shower—interpreted by the local people as a very auspicious sign. The people of the village and her followers cremated her body and did not wait for Gyeltshen Trulku Rinpoche to arrive. Tsheten Dema heard from an old lady who practiced with Anim Woesel Chöden and who is still alive but in retreat that when Anim Woesel Chöden was passing away she told her followers that she was not coming back. Later Rinpoche and all her students requested her to come back for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is said that she was reborn as a son to one of her disciples, an ex-nun, but was short-lived, passing away within a week of his birth.

After her demise, the complex that Anim Woesel Chöden and her disciples lived in was not well taken care of such that it became dilapidated. Some of her students, both male and female left the place; some got married among themselves whilst others went in search of a new teacher. Her remaining disciples appealed her teacher, Gyeltshen Trulku Rinpoche to renovate and manage the Goenpa (temple). As requested by the people, Gyeltshen Trulku took over the management and started building a monastery, which comprised a common place for meditation, a guest house and other facilities. Since then there have been about forty to fifty people studying and living there all the time.

As has been the tradition in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism for centuries, disciples of great masters go in search of their teachers' reincarnation. Yet, it is extremely rare that disciples of female masters would search for their incarnation and even rarer for a female to be recognised as a reincarnated master or *trulku*. I cite the case of the the reincarnation of the Great Khandro of Tsurphu in Tibet and events leading to the recognition and subsequent enthronement of her reincarnation, Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche. Khandro Rinpoche is a famous contemporary female *trulku* but there was no will or initiative to enthrone her as a Rinpoche, because she is female! This prompted her predecessor's disciples to champion for her enthronement, as Simmer-Brown (2002: 185) recounts in her following narrative:

Mindroling Rinpoche was a close friend of the Karmapa and thought nothing of the special visit he paid to his newborn daughter, conferring on her the name Karma Ugyen Tsomo. But after consulting with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, the Karmapa confirmed with her father that the child was an enlightened emanation of the *yoginī* [Khandro Ugyen Tsomo of Tsurphu]. When the girl was ten months old, an official announcement of the *yoginī*'s rebirth was quietly made public, and several monks from Rumtek came to pay their respects. The Karmapa himself came yearly to give her empowerments and teachings. Eventually, as the baby grew into girlhood, the nuns who were Karma Ugyen Tsomo's former students went to His Holiness to ask about her. We have heard she has been found, they asserted. Yes, she had. Had she been recognized? Yes, and her recognition had been confirmed by other great and realized teachers. So, insisted the nuns, enthrone her! This was an unusual request. A number of lineages of realized women in Tibet had emanated again and again in successive lifetimes of practice and teaching. But they were usually not officially recognized and empowered as *trulkus*, as male emanations were; instead, they were considered incarnate *ḍākinīs*. These women were called *Jetsünma*, an honorific title signifying great realization and exemplary teaching. They were raised in a "brocaded life" of honor, dedicated meditation, and training in Buddhist traditions, but they were not given a monastic education or expected to carry out official duties as their male counterparts were. The nuns' insistence that she be enthroned and empowered as a rinpoche was unexpected. But eventually His Holiness could not refuse them. The young girl was first enthroned as Khandro Rinpoche in 1976 in Kalimpong when she was nine years old

In the case of Anim Lopenma Paldon of Jachung Karmo, no such effort has been made by her disciples to locate her reincarnation though she too was a highly realized practitioner. Sixteen years after her demise, there is still no news of any reincarnation of Anim Lopenma, which could put a permanent full-stop to Anim Lopenma's spiritual legacy.

Much proof is needed in order to recognise a child as a reincarnated master. A child has to go through rigorous tests before a definite proclamation can be made and formal

enthronement is performed. The same process was followed even for the reincarnation of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet. This is absolutely necessary to weed out false claims from parents wanting to benefit from the fame and fortune which follow the recognition of a *trulku*. In the case of Anim Trulku also, there was another child presented as a prospective *trulku*, which made the recognition of the real *trulku* even more complicated.

Anim Trulku Chözang Lhamo, born in 1983 in Samdrup Jongkhar, Bhutan was recognized as the reincarnation of Anim Woesel Chöden at the age of five. Her mother, Dorji Dema is from Ngang-malam near Goenpa Singma while her father is from Samdrup Jongkhar. As a toddler, she could vividly remember her past birth. According to Anim Trulku's mother,

Ever since my daughter started talking a word or two she used to speak about going to her home in Jashar and referred to herself as Woesel Chöden, the name of the previous Anim Trulku. When I told her that I did not know where Jashar was, she said she knew the place. At that time she also used to play with mud making the images of *torma* (ritual cake) and holy script with banana leaf. She would then take a banana branch and say that she is doing a *pūjā* on long life of her students and followers.

When she was two years old, a nun who was the attendant of her previous life came to her house in Samdrup Jongkhar on the pretext of alms round, looking for her reincarnation. The child immediately recognized the nun, addressed her by her name and sat on the nun's lap, then told the nun that she too had a set of monastic robes at Jashar and a rosary also, teasing the nun, saying, "Your robes are old, mine are new. Look, I have a *mala* too!" The little girl then asked the nun to sit on the floor and the child sat on a higher platform and began to wave a banana leaf in imitation of a *lama* bestowing long-life initiation (using the five-coloured *tsedar*). Later, the child insisted on going with the nun, saying, "I want to go with you to Jashar (referring to her previous incarnation's nunnery)" and cried when the nun left the house.

A year later, when she was slightly more than three-years old, she insisted that her mother take her to her previous incarnation's retreat hut and nunnery, saying, "*I want to go to Jashar...I want to go to Jashar*". But her mother and other family members had never heard of a place called Jashar and dismissed her request but after repeated requests, her mother relented and brought her to Pema Gatshel district by car. Just before Pema Gatshel proper, the little *trulku* stopped their car at the side of the road and started trekking into the jungle. Her mother and a large accompanying party were perplexed as they had no idea where the jungle path was leading to, but the little *trulku* confidently walked on. Her mother recalls,

She somehow led the way and when we reached a part that looked like a dried pool she stopped. Later I found out that there was a lake there but it was now all dried out and Anim Woesel Chöden used to come and meditate there.

A few yards away, when they reached what appeared to be an old house, the little *trulku* circumambulated three times and entered the house. Inside, the little *trulku* did three prostrations and then spread a carpet that she took out from an obscure corner of the house which was an old rundown room, formerly belonging to Anim Woesel Chöden. The little girl laid a table and then took out a bell, *vajra* and *damaru* which was kept in the old house and started playing the musical instruments with great familiarity, like she was performing a ritual. Anim Trulku's mother added,

One of the older nuns, a former disciple of Anim Woesel Chöden who had completed nine years' retreat teased my daughter and kept many *vajras* and bells and also the rosaries in front of her on the table to see if she could recognize her old things. She immediately picked up her own belongings amongst the array of implements though it was old and looked dirty and the sound was not good. She threw away the rest and said this is my house and my things.

The child felt very much at home in the old house. Later, when it was time for them to return home to Samdrup Jongkhar, she refused, telling her mother that this was her house and that she wanted to stay there from then on. She told her mother and the accompanying party to go home and leave her behind at the house. Her mother forcibly took her home since she was so young and moreover, not yet recognised as a *trulku*. The little *trulku* cried for days. The little girl was subsequently recognized as the reincarnation of Anim Woesel Chöden.

At the age of five, Anim Trulku was brought to Thimphu Zilukha Dewachen Drupthop Goenpa to pursue her monastic training. At nine, she became the *umze* in Zilukha but then at fifteen, her monastic training was pre-empted because a female student of Anim Woesel Chöden claimed that her cousin's son was the actual reincarnation of her teacher. The student created much fuss and misunderstanding that it was difficult for her to stay on at Zilukha. So Gyeltshen Trulku Rinpoche and the villagers requested Anim Trulku to return to Jashar Goenpa to avoid the situation escalating into a full-blown conflict. Once the issue was resolved, she went into three years' retreat under the supervision of Gyeltshen Trulku Rinpoche, whose own previous incarnation was the teacher of Anim Woesel Chöden. Anim Trulku continued her retreat for six years. At the age of twenty-one, she was appointed the Dorji Lopen, the Vajra Master of Jashar Gonpa, by Gyeltshen Trulku Rinpoche. This was the first time that such a title had been bestowed on a nun in Bhutan in this century. After serving the monastery for seven years as a Vajra Master, she again went into retreat. Once during her retreat, the present King of Bhutan visited the nunnery and asked for Anim Trulku's audience but she refused saying that she was in retreat and had nothing to do with him. Je Khenpo also visited and blessed the temple and statues inside it.

During my follow-up fieldwork in Bhutan in 2014, I learnt that Anim Trulku (see Figure 7.3, p.324) is now out of retreat and supervising the day-to-day affairs of the nunnery and has begun to give public teachings. Anim Trulku has also appeared in an interview on national television in Bhutan in recent months. Although Anim Trulku has been recognised as a *trulku*, she too is yet to be enthroned; hence, she does not hold the title, Rinpoche. It is left to be seen if the male clergy associated with Anim Trulku will break way from patriarchal shackles and bestow the title which she rightly deserves.



Figure 7.3: Anim Trulku of Jashar Goenpa blessing devotees during an initiation²⁰¹

²⁰¹ Source: Personal photographs shared by Bhikṣuṇī Tsultrim Wangmo in 2012.

7.6 Disempowering Aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhist Symbolism

Vajrayāna Buddhism has a vast pantheon of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas (Buddhahood aspirants), tutelary deities (Tib: *yidam*), heroes and heroines (Tib: *pawo* and *pamo*), *ḍākas* and *ḍākinīs* (Tib: *khandro* and *khandroma*), dharma protectors, *nagas* and many other supramundane beings (Crins, 2008). As I have discussed in this thesis, Buddhist practice in the study areas are dominated by men. Crins noted that even religious symbolism in Vajrayāna Buddhism is male dominated (Crins, 2008), which corresponds to my observation of religious symbolism in the study area. There are several female deities in the Vajrayāna Buddhist pantheon, as I have presented in this chapter, but male deities are more common. The lineage trees of the Drukpa Kagyu School (practiced in Western Bhutan) and Nyingmapa School of Vajrayāna Buddhism feature mostly male lineage holders of the different oral transmission lineages of *sutra* and *tantra*. The Drukpa Kagyu lineage tree has no female masters, only Buddhas in female manifestation such as Tāra (Tibetan: *Drolma*) and Vajrayoginī (Tibetan: *Dorje Naljorma*) and *ḍākinīs* (Dzongkha: *khandro*) which are more like supernatural beings. Women at Jachung Karmo can hardly identify with any female human masters of the past as all are male. The Nyingmapa features Yeshe Tsogyal, the spiritual consort of Guru Padmasambhava at the centre of the lineage tree in *yabyum*²⁰² posture but there is a stark absence of female human masters as well. In fact, both lineage trees feature female Buddhas in *yabyum* form, e.g. Kalachakra and consort, *Chakrasamvara* and consort etc. This speaks volumes about the role of women in Vajrayāna Buddhism compared to men. Nonetheless, it is extremely fascinating that women are portrayed at all in Vajrayāna Buddhist symbolism.

According to (Gross, 1996: 225), reverence of male deities and role models “entrench women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority while at the same time creating the impression that female power is not legitimate” (Gross, 1996:

²⁰² Symbol of union of mother-father deities in tantric imagery

225). Therefore, apart from their female enlightened role models (the founders of their respective nunneries), the Bhutanese nuns in this study have only male models in a highly patriarchal monastic body of Bhutan and remain entrenched in the lowest ranks of the monastic hierarchy as lesser *samgha* with little education and low or no ordination status.

An uncanny symbol, which is unique to Bhutan is the phallic symbol which is commonly painted on houses to ward off evil spirits. The symbol of the phallus or 'thunderbolt' owes its popular depiction in Bhutanese symbolism to Drukpa Kunley, a 15-16th century CE mythical figure and enlightened master (Blowright, 2011). Popularly known as the 'Divine Madman', Drukpa Kunley, the national saint of Bhutan is famous for subduing demonesses and seducing women (which according to his biography, is aiding women to achieve enlightenment through tantric sexual union practice) (Dowman, 2000).

Symbols such as these can prove to be counter-productive to women whereby they have been used to glorify the traditional gender roles which further trap women in subordinate positions. Gross (1996) quoted (Chung, 1990) who warns against this misuse of complementarity by men who perpetuate stereotypical roles for women. From my observation, the phallic symbol has in some ways contributed to the exaltation of male sexuality and insinuates that women must be subordinated by men, in the most extreme ways, through the phallic 'thunderbolt' symbol.

Pictures of elaborately drawn phalluses can be seen on house walls and even on car number plates (Kuensel, 2013). Small wooden phalluses are also hung at the four corners of houses. A phallus is present in all aspects of Bhutanese life, from the birth of a newborn calf, inauguration of new houses or hung in the fields when the crops begin to sprout, as practiced in Eastern Bhutan. During *Tshechus*, the *Atsara* wears a cloth phallus as part of their head gear (Kuensel, 2013). The phalluses come in different shapes and sizes, carved in wood, metal, stone and cloth (Kuensel, 2013).

7.7 Women's Subjectivity and Female Symbolism

Gross (1996) reveals that the impact of female deity/personality symbolism has almost never been elicited in a systematic study. In fact, female deities play an important role in Bhutan, not only for women, but also men (Crins, 2008). It is for these reasons that I will include this perspective in this thesis. Gross asserts that studies about female deities are more meaningful if they are associated with real living women, as in the context of this study on nuns at the Jachung Karmo Nunnery in Punakha, Bhutan.

7.7.1 Bhutanese Nuns, Gender Identity and Female Symbolism

The first part of this study focuses on women's subjectivity by listening to the voices of the Bhutanese nuns themselves on their perceptions of their personal, social and religious meanings of being female and the corresponding elements in Vajrayāna Buddhist practice which shape their subjectivity.

On the subject of gender identity of the nuns, only one third of the nuns interviewed think of themselves as genderless (androgene). About half of the nuns said they identify more with the male gender because of the androgynous *saṃgha* robes while the remaining said that they still felt 'female'. Lungten Wangmo, 36 and Thinley Wangmo, 16 said, "Since we have no hair on our head I feel like male" to which, Phurba Lhamo, 14, adds, "We are identified as female when we have hair." In contrast, Nima Dolma, 15, who identifies herself as female, says, "I feel as female as nothing has changed after shaving and donning the robe." The same is observed by Kinley Zangmo, age 25, discipline master and temple attendant, "We do not feel any difference as both monks and nuns wear the same robes". Another nun, Namgay Lhamo, 43 asserts, "When I shave my head and don the robes, I feel myself as female Bodhisattva as we do not identify with male in any way."

Even though some of these women still maintain their subjectivity, these women still think that a female body is disadvantageous as Namgay Lhamo further adds, “I do not feel good to be in a female body because we cannot do many things like monks and even if we try to do things, we face lots of problems.” An interesting observation is that all the nuns interviewed wished to be reborn as male in their next lives. This demonstrates that regardless of which gender they identify with when they don the robes and how good they feel about being female, they all wish to escape rebirth in a female form. Dawa Dema, 25, asserts thus, “I wish to be reborn as a male and that too as a monk because if we are born female, we will suffer a lot. In addition, women cannot stand on their own without the support of men.” Cultural conditioning still heavily influences perceptions on women’s status in Bhutan. For example, Nima Dolma and several other nuns still subscribe to the traditional Bhutanese idea that women are of lower status than men: “I don’t think nuns should hold equal position as monks because monks are 9 times greater and higher than women. Plus women have to take 500 times rebirth to be born as a man”. This shows that external androgyny has not been successful in liberating these women from the notion of a ‘sexed-body’ which perpetuates stereotypes in gender-roles. Women still feel trapped in a female body and do not see its intrinsic worth.

However, soteriological androgyny has some impact on the nuns in that they deeply understand that Buddhahood transcends gender. The nuns interviewed in this study unanimously agreed that women can achieve enlightenment in their female form. Namgay Lhamo said that “As long as we practice well and sincerely, women can get enlightened. For example, the sister of Lama Ngawang Pekar, founder of this nunnery called Rinchen Zangmo became realized and attained a rainbow body and disappeared.” According to monk, Tenzin Pelzang, 33 years old, “Khandro Sonam Peldon received teachings from Phajo Drukgom Zhigpo²⁰³ and she attained high realisations and developed special

²⁰³ In Bhutanese religious history, he is deeply revered as the pioneer and dynamic Drukpa leader. His life and deeds mentioned are intimately linked with the initial spread of Drukpa Kagyu lineage in Bhutan.

siddhis like flying at the last stage of her life.” Dekyi, 17, further adds, “Females can become enlightened, e.g. Gelongma Palmo²⁰⁴ is a female and she is enlightened.” According to Nima Dolma, “There is no difference in being a Buddha in male or female form as dharma is the same for both genders.” Some young nuns like Phurba Lhamo firmly state, “I prefer to be Buddha in female form as enlightenment does not depend on whether one is male or female.”

Through their answers, we can see that this deep understanding of the irrelevance of gender in achieving Buddhahood or high spiritual attainments has come about mainly because of the prevalence of enlightened/highly realised female masters. Another important factor for such confidence in the nuns on the ability of women to achieve Buddhahood is through the presence of female deity, i.e. female symbolism. For example, Kinley Wangmo, 16, spontaneously remarked, “If there is no female Buddha then there will be a big difference because we will not know of women’s Buddhahood”. Kinley Zangmo agrees, “If there were no female Buddha or images, I will think that only men can become enlightened and not women.” She further added that “Female images like Tāra encourage and show by example that we females also can achieve Buddhahood [as men are able to].” Lopen Tenzin Dema, said “If there is no female Buddha we might not practice dharma thinking that it is only for men to practice and gain enlightenment.” Namgay Lhamo also shared the same sentiments, “If there is no female Buddha then it will be difficult for us to practice thinking that only men get realizations.” These nuns also find female deities much easier to visualise as they identify more with these deities, as shared by Ridam Zangmo, 16, “Female images are helpful because when we see and recite their names in the prayers it is easy to visualize.”

²⁰⁴ Referring to the founder of the Nyungne practice, Bhikṣuṇī Lakshmi.

7.8 Discrimination by monks and laypeople

We have come across some elements of discrimination of women in the religious realm in Bhutan through the narrative presented in Chapter Five and the challenges pertaining to nuns' empowerment discussed in Chapter Six which mainly pertains to access to education. This has been the most consistent, overt and disturbing form of discrimination against women which has far reaching consequences to female practitioners' empowerment in Bhutan. The other forms of discrimination I am about to highlight in this section, though not blatant, have damaging effects on women's self-worth and status in Bhutanese society. I contend that these 'discreet' gender biases occur because Bhutanese women, especially nuns are not fully empowered in secular and religious education and easily fall prey to abuse by those who take advantage of the nuns' lack of capacity. These include people in positions of power.

When I interviewed the nuns of Jachung Karmo to gauge if the Buddhist clergy and laypeople treat the nuns any different from monks, here is what I was told by Kinley Zangmo:

People invite monks more than us and even if we are invited, we are asked to come on our own whereas monks are fetched by the sponsors with big cars. Moreover, nuns are invited where we have to do hardwork [referring to *Nyungne* prayers where nuns have to fast without food and drink] and get less donations whereas monks are invited to party-type prayers where they earn a lot and take back huge donations from the laity.

Lopen Tenzin Dema said:

Monks have better accomodation, their monasteries located near towns with good road access and full facilities in every aspect. In contrast, nuns live in remote nunneries with no electricity, road, water, toilets and kitchen. We do not even have enough firewood to cook decent meals. Monks have many retreat places whereas nuns have to scour for even a single retreat place. Nuns do not have teachers and when we get monk teachers, people start to gossip, accusing us of having sexual relations with the monks.

Namgay Lhamo:

Many monks and men who have done so much of study and retreat are appointed as *lamas* and *lopens* [teachers]. Nuns however, have no such opportunity though our Prime Minister²⁰⁵ always pays lip service that nuns are given equal rights as monks. In practice, nothing has changed, the monks are still higher and nuns lower in everything.

²⁰⁵ Referring to the Prime Minister in 2012, Jigme Y. Thinley

Inadequacies in basic infrastructure and education aside, there is an aspect of Bhutanese religio-cultural practice which discriminate women on the basis of our so-called 'female impurity'. I have mentioned several times over in this thesis that female practitioners are disadvantaged and deemed to lack efficacy on the basis of female impurity. The idea that women are impure because of menstruation is constantly reinforced by monks and laypeople. Phurba Lhamo says,

Nuns do not have equal status as monks because we are discriminated on the basis of our menstruation.

In Bhutan, women are not allowed to enter the inner sanctum or the *goenkhana* of temples housing the protector deities. This malpractice is generally blamed on female impurity on the basis of women's menstruation. Namgay Lhamo shares her frustration on this practice which she feels is selective and subordinates ordinary women but not the aristocrats:

Women cannot enter the *goenkhana* and certain temples; but we see our queens, princesses and wives of high officials getting access. The reason given by temple attendants is because of our menstruation. If that is the reason, then how come female royals and dignitaries can enter? Don't they menstruate like ordinary women? If men say women are impure, then men themselves are not entirely pure because they sleep with menstruating women.

I agree with Namgay Lhamo's assertion because in some temples, nuns are allowed to enter the *goenkhana* but not laywomen. I have personally been allowed to enter such areas, for example in Changangkha Lhakhang in Thimphu and another temple in Bumthang but not my non-renunciate female relatives who were with me. If the injunction against entering is based on female impurity, then how come nuns are allowed to enter? Besides, at the Wolakha nunnery in Talo, Punakha, it is the nuns who are the caretakers of the shrine housing the protector deity. However, when I visited the nunnery in 2013, I asked if I could enter the shrine because the nuns probably through a slip of the tongue

told me that nuns are allowed to enter. I was politely refused, citing the reason that the caretaker could not find the key to the shrine!

On another occasion, also in 2013, I saw a protector deity dressed in black which is supposedly barred to women yet fully exposed to the public as it was placed on the right-hand side of the altar housing the central Buddha and Guru Rinpoche statues. This was at the Zangtok Pelri temple in Kuruthang, Punakha where any woman can enter since it was the main shrine hall. This shows that the prohibition is not universal in Bhutan and is sometimes loosely enforced because the real reason is not on the basis of female impurity. If menstruation were the absolute reason why females are forbidden from going anywhere near the protector deity's statue, then there should be no concession for royals, aristocrats, nuns, no nun caretakers and the statue cannot be placed where women can easily access it. I contend that the prohibition actually stems from misogynistic tendencies which still prevail in Bhutanese society, often perpetuated by the Buddhist clergy. I base my argument on Tsheten Dema's following assertion:

In Tashigang Dzong there is a *goenkha*. Women are not allowed to enter inside it because it is said that there is a *yab-yum* [male-female deities in sexual union] statue and if women enter, the female deity gets very jealous and puts women to death.

Tsheten Dema's sharing is interesting because she brings in a new dimension to the standard justification for this injunction which is not based on menstruation, but jealousy. How is it a woman's fault if the female protector deity is insecure and jealous? What about the male deity? Since he has a female consort, does he not too feel insecure when men enter the *goenkhana*? Here we see another cultural stereotype which is also supported in certain misogynistic Buddhist texts as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis whereby women are always labelled as temptresses²⁰⁶ —in this case, able to seduce even male protector deities!

²⁰⁶ (Law, 1956-1957), Kabilsingh, 1992, Sponberg, 1992, Gutschow, 2004, Schaeffer, 2004)

I interviewed some of the monks about this prohibition and most assert that there is actually no basis according to Buddhist teachings for prohibiting women from entering the *goenkhana*. Lopen Dawa Gyeltshen, the ex-Lopen Tse of the Thimphu Dzong, 63 years said:

There is no reason for not allowing women to enter into certain temples. This prohibition is just a man-made rule which people follow. It is not according to dharma that women are not allowed to enter.

Tashi Phuntsho, 48 years agreed and said:

It is said that women cannot enter the *goenkha*. But it is strange because the same prayer for this protector can be performed by both nuns and monks.

Yonten Thinley, 33 years old monk:

There is no dharma practiced only by men or women because it can be practiced equally. For example, Khandro Sonam Peldon received teachings from Phajo Drukgom and she managed to realize and went flying at her last stage of the life. About women entering *goenkhana*, it is believed it is because of menstruation. I think women can enter if they do not contact with men like monks. If that's indeed the case, then men shouldn't enter too as they too have contact with women.

I asked the same to laymen and laywomen, many of whom opine that this injunction against women is somewhat dubious. Singye Dorji, farmer, 49 years:

We have the *namtok* (doubt) that women have impurities like menstruation and childbirth and that will chase the deities etc. These processes are natural and not man made. So there should not be any restriction for women entering temples. In fact men also cannot enter a *goenkha* if we had [sexual] relations with women. Therefore, it is same with both sexes, not only women. Queens are allowed in the *goenkha* probably because of their previous merit that they are reborn in the royal family.

Lobsang Choeje, *gomchen*, 42 years:

Goenkha is a place of the male protector, Yeshi Goenpo and his consort (*yum*), Palden Lhamo. It is for the benefit of the people. So it is good if men without vows [of celibacy] also don't go in. The restriction is for both men and women if they do not keep their vows.

Hence I conclude that the injunction is not specifically mentioned in any Buddhist teaching but has its roots in the pre-Buddhist culture of Bhutan, yet, influenced by

misogynistic²⁰⁷ Buddhist texts which harp on female impurity even though it is evident that the Buddha rejected any notions of impurity, other than at the mental level²⁰⁸.

On a different note, nuns have also been the objects of lewd sexual innuendos amongst the general Bhutanese public. Namgay Lhamo of Jachung Karmo recounts an incident when she and her fellow nuns of her ex-nunnery, the Zilukha nunnery in Thimphu were subjected to a mass media ridicule suggesting that nuns were meant for the sexual pleasure of *gomchens*.

A well-known pun in Bhutan, in the form of a jingle slotted in between programmes which was aired for sometime on state radio mocked the nuns of this nunnery by saying that the *gomchens* will roll down from the Sangaygang hilltop²⁰⁹ and landing right on the nuns in a compromising position. This jingle spread far and wide to all parts of Bhutan, which thoroughly embarrassed the nuns, through no fault of ours. Instead of instilling respect and faith towards the nuns as the media does towards monks and *gomchen*, the media displayed great disrespect to the nuns, which spread to the general public. The Zilukha nuns became the laughing stock of the country because of this vicious and downright disgusting ‘joke’.

This demonstrates that the Bhutanese, like their ancient Indian counterparts also view nuns with suspicion, accusing them of being promiscuous—unable to keep their vows of celibacy. During the time of the Buddha, when some *bhikṣuṇīs* were travelling along the road with a group of merchants, laypeople “saw them and teased them, saying they were probably going to have sex” (Sujato, 2009: 93).²¹⁰ Little has changed as nuns are still the objects of such ridicule.

Despite the discrimination that women face, Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist texts as practiced in Bhutan and elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural area actually vindicate women with their unique injunction against disparaging women (Gross, 1996). The tantric practice of Vajrayāna Buddhism requires the practitioner (men and women alike) to observe fourteen root tantric vows; the last of which is to refrain from despising women.

²⁰⁷ A good example would be Samten Lingpa’s seventeenth-century hagiography of Mandarava, Guru Padmasambhava’s Indian female consort whereby the medieval Tibetan biographer attributes misogynistic statements to Guru Padmasambhava (Schaeffer, 2004: 93).

²⁰⁸ The Dhammapada—Verse 160

²⁰⁹ The Zilukha nunnery is situated at the base of a hill called Sangaygang

²¹⁰ drawn from the Mahiśāsaka Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya 6a

In addition, a tantric practitioner must also keep the Mother Tantra pledge by constantly praising women in mind.

Failure to keep the vows (Skt: *samaya*) properly results in a root tantric downfall. The rationale behind this vow is that women symbolise wisdom and emptiness (Skt: *śūnyatā*). To achieve enlightenment, tantric practitioners must gain insight into the emptiness of all phenomena and self. Therefore, if enlightenment is desired, one must refrain at all costs from misogynistic attitudes through conduct, speech and thoughts since women are the embodiment of the very wisdom which a tantric practitioner aims to achieve, i.e. wisdom realising emptiness.

In the Mahāyāna *Mahasukhavati Vyūha Sutra*, it is mentioned that in the Pureland of Buddha Amitabha, known as Dewachen in Tibetan, there is no man or woman, meaning that beings born in the Pureland are androgynous. Dualistic notions such as man and woman are not present in the Pureland of Buddha Amitabha. The Pureland practice of Amitabha Buddha is widely practiced in both Drukpa Kagyu and Nyingma traditions in the study area and *Prajñāpāramitā* texts are part of the monastic syllabus of the *shedra*.

7.9 Sexual Relations—Consort Practice or Abuse?

Another grievous dimension in the analysis of the mistreatment of nuns is sexual abuse. I highlighted an incidence of abuse of nuns in the previous chapter by monks in authority, i.e. teachers. About two years after my fieldwork, my research subjects told me that there was a case at another nunnery whereby a monk made a young nun pregnant. He cleverly asked her to leave the nunnery and then followed suit not long after. Rumours have it that the monk facilitated the paying back of *ba*²¹¹ or monastic fine for the nun and are now living together.

²¹¹ Fine imposed by nunneries on one who disrobes

I am highlighting these incidences to demonstrate that some monk teachers who should be teaching dharma to the nuns and who should be beacons of morality are the very ones who take advantage of the nuns. It is not fully clear if the sexual acts were consensual but the fact that monks and nuns have to observe vows of celibacy is taken very lightly by monks and nuns in Bhutan. One of the gravest dangers in placing monk or *gomchen* teachers at the nunnery is indeed the scope for sexual abuse. As Gutschow (2004: 161) observed in the Zangskari context:

Even if the teachers contributed little or nothing to the nuns' education, they expected and received assistance in countless tedious tasks, all at no cost. The potential for abuse, especially in the case of younger monks or those with illicit intentions, need hardly be spelled out.

Had nuns been sufficiently empowered to teach their own nuns and had nuns been taught the monastic code of conduct²¹², these incidences could have been curbed. Nuns dare not go against their teachers' wishes, paving the way for sexual exploitation by unscrupulous monks, many of whom are teachers and sometimes, even directors of nunneries. Here, the typical Vajrayāna guru-disciple relationship is taken a bit too far whereby nuns accept whatever their teachers tell them to do, even if it means compromising their vows of celibacy to please their gurus.

In the case I just cited, when another nun went to complain to the director, also a monk, instead of investigating the matter and punishing the monk teacher, the whistle-blower nun was expelled. Apparently, even the director was having clandestine affairs of his own. For fear of exposing each other, the nunnery director expelled the nun to cover up the matter. Just as the two nuns at Jachung Karmo were censured by their monk teachers just for attending a conference, nuns can also be expelled with impunity, as Gutschow (2004:172) noted:

Monks have retained an unambiguous right to admit, censure, and expel nuns, while nuns remain forbidden to officially reproach monks, regardless of the offense.

²¹² The Vinaya punishes all intentional sexual conduct by monks or nuns, providing a hierarchy of penalties depending upon the nature of the offense. Penetration with emission results in expulsion from the order, regardless of the gender or species of the partner or the orifice penetrated. (Zwilling, 1992: 207)

The root cause of incidences of sexual abuse of nuns by monks is the lax observance of the *Vinaya* by many monks in Bhutan. Hence, there is a pressing need for stricter enforcement of the *Vinaya* in Bhutan and elsewhere in the Himalayan region. The following observations of monks in Tibet by Gyatso (2010: 7) strike a chord with the Bhutanese monastic scenario:

Bhiksus in Tibet regularly handle silver, eat dinner, spend time alone with women in rooms, and sow seeds of dissent in the *sangha*. They regularly do those things without censure or punishment.

In late December 2013, I received an audience with a Queen Mother of Bhutan, Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck and reported this state of affairs and the nuns' lack of access to a grievance mechanism which safeguards whistle-blowers. Her Majesty replied that nuns can report incidences of sexual abuse either to the nunnery authorities or if that were difficult, they could come directly to her. With due respect to Her Majesty, I personally feel that this is not the best of solutions because as we have seen, if the nuns complain to the nunneries, the persons in authority may themselves be involved. About reporting directly to Her Majesty, the nuns, who often lack basic sustenance, can ill afford to make the trip to Thimphu. Moreover, due to palace protocol, it would be very difficult to even get an audience with Her Majesty. Therefore, the Bhutanese nuns need a better grievance mechanism which protects whistle-blowers, especially one which will ensure anonymity.

Also, the monastic body as we have seen protects the interest of monks more than nuns. There are cases whereby the perpetrators of sexual violence and abuse are from the higher ranks of the Buddhist clergy. What then are the chances that a nun's complaint would be given due consideration? We have seen that instead of punishing the monks, the whistle-blowers are expelled. The Bhutanese scenario is not much different as Gutschow (2004: 18)'s Zangskari nuns,

Monks accused of adultery or rape were disrobed and fined, but with minimal public outrage. Cases of lapsed celibacy hardly shook the authority of the monastery.

Moreover, the burden of proof is on the nuns who have been sexually violated. How is a nun supposed to prove incidences of sexual abuse? There have been cases whereby a nun is expelled from the nunnery, forced to disrobe as the common assumption is that the victim has broken the basic vows of celibacy²¹³, therefore, she can no longer continue to live as a nun. This is what happened to a Bhutanese nun decades past as retold by Wikan (1996), amongst many others. This should not be so as the *Vinaya* is “not so cruel, and deals with rape in a compassionate way, allowing the nun, who is the victim not the perpetrator, to continue her spiritual path” (Sujato, 2009: 141). According to the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* (cited in Sujato, 2009: 141),

If she²¹⁴ is forced, then if she does not feel pleasure in the three times [i.e., when entering, staying, or leaving] there is no offense. The offender is to be expelled.²¹⁵

Even though the position of the *Vinaya* is crystal clear that “there is no offense for a nun who is raped, and the blame must lie with the rapist” (Sujato, 2009: 142), there is still the burden of proof for women that the sexual act was not consensual, i.e. they were indeed raped. This is very hard to prove because many incidences of sexual violation are a result of brainwashing by monk teachers that sexual relations with the guru is in accordance with tantric rites (yoga of sexual union). Moreover, nuns who mostly come from rural areas, with minimum schooling and lack of exposure to secular legislation would not know what to do in the event of rape. There is neither any awareness-raising on sexual harassment nor a corresponding grievance mechanism in the two nunneries I studied. Therefore, the Bhutanese clergy must draw up formal guidelines to protect the nuns and lay female dharma practitioners from sexual exploitation and educate the nuns on their rights, in prevention and post-trauma.

²¹³ corresponding to *pārājika 1* for *bhikṣuṇīs*

²¹⁴ Referring to any of the three categories of female renunciants in Buddhism, i.e. *bhikṣuṇī*, *śikṣāmana* or *śramaṇeri*

²¹⁵ “A man who rapes a bhikkhuni cannot ever be ordained, and if they are ordained by mistake, they must be expelled. Similarly, a novice who rapes a nun must be expelled” (Sujato, 2009: 141)

Moreover, it is the obligation of the monastic body to ensure that nuns and women in general, understand that monks and lay male practitioners cannot lure them into sexual relations for any reason whatsoever, even on the pretext of consort practice, which is the most often reason cited. Many women, nuns included, through patriarchal propaganda cannot resist the prospects of being a human *ḍākinī* through the yoga of sexual union (Skt: *kārmamudrā*; Tib: *las kyi phyag rgya* pronounced *lekyi chaggya*). As Simmer-Brown (2002: 214) explains,

...human women are called *ḍākinī* when they are the mothers, sisters, or consorts of incarnate lamas. Consorts are considered *ḍākinīs* out of respect for their intimacy with the *lama*, but also because it is possible that together they practice the spiritual yoga of sexual union.

7.9.1 Karmamudrā or Tantric Seal (Consort Practice)

The Vajrayāna tradition provides powerful and skillful methods that accelerate inner development in direct, tangible ways. There are traditionally three ways to realize the nature of passion in the yogic traditions of tantra. First, in creation-phase practice one can visualize the yidam deities as *yab-yum* in sexual union, as discussed in the inner *ḍākinī* description of Vajrayoginī and Cakrasaṃvara. Second, one can practice *tummo* (Skt: *cāṇḍāli*), or the generation of internal heat, through the subtle-body practices of the vital breath moving into the central channel. Third, one can practice so-called sexual yoga (Skt: *kārmamudrā*, Tib: *lekyi chaggya*) with a consort. Realizing the true nature of passion in all of these forms transforms ordinary passion into the basis for the experience of great bliss (Skt: *mahāsukha*), which greatly accelerates the removal of emotional and conceptual obscurations in one's practice. The purpose of exploring the nature of passion is to bring about realization where it has not already occurred; from this point of view, the experience of bliss is a great expedient in the practice of tantra (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 216-217).

The tantric seal (Skt: *karmamudrā*, Tib: *las kyi phyag rgya*) is the consort practice which corresponds to the third initiation in tantric practice. The *karmamudrā* is the source

of the wisdom of bliss-voidness (Changchub & Nyingpo, 2002). The tantric seal practice is said to be a speedy method to induce very subtle states of mind which accelerates the practitioner's direct realization of the true nature mind, the secret *ḍākinī* or the Mother *Prajñāpāramitā*.

The practice of the third initiation is only for advanced tantric practitioners who have obtained the consent of their gurus to engage in such practices. It must not be interpreted as ordinary sexual activity but a practice which requires extraordinary restraint and mindfulness. It is not recommended for all tantric practitioners. For example, Guru Padmasambhava sanctioned the consort practice to only selected and spiritually advanced practitioners like Yeshe Tsogyal.

If practiced without the necessary authorisation and three recognitions as per the tantric vows, the tantric seal practice can be extremely dangerous and results in the practitioner straying off the path and ending up in the lower realm. According to Khenpo Yonten Gyatso in his commentary on the *Treasury of Precious Qualities* (Changchub and Nyingpo, 2002: xxviii):

The teachings say that those who take and practice explicitly the third initiation must have previously trained their own bodies by the path of skillful means, so that their subtle channels are perfectly straight, the wind-energy is purified and the essence-drops brought under control. Trained in the view of the two previous empowerments, they must be able to tread the path with the help of the extraordinary view and meditation, without any craving for pleasure. ... If a beginner, who lacks this capacity goes around claiming to be a practitioner of Mantra and becomes enmeshed in ordinary desire, he is destined for the lower realms. ... It is better to practice according to one's true capacity and to the limit of one's ability, believing confidently in the principle of karma and with faith in the Three Jewels. As we have said, in this yoga, sexual energy is used in a way entirely cleansed of the impurities of ordinary passion and lust.

7.9.2 Nuns Perceptions on the Karmamudrā Practice

The majority of nuns interviewed in Jachung Karmo told me that nuns should not violate their vows of celibacy to become spiritual consorts because instead of leading to enlightenment it would instead lead to hell or in milder terms, give rise to numerous obstacles and problems in one's spiritual practice. However, a few, especially the young

nuns do not seem to mind as they believe that becoming a spiritual consort would lead one to higher realizations. One young nun confidently asserts,

I will accept the offer without any hesitation as the practitioner is higher and can lead us to enlightenment.

Most nuns of Jashar Goenpa have never even heard of the concept of spiritual consort and think that this practice is non-existent. The senior-most *tshampa* nuns, i.e. those who have completed their *losum chusum* retreats said that their Rinpoche never mentioned anything of this sort to them, saying that if it were important, their Rinpoche would have mentioned about it. However one nun said that she heard about it from some monks and practitioners but thinks that it is merely a visualisation exercise, without involving physical intimacy. It is interesting to note the nuns from the two nunneries share the view that intimate contact with men is bad for their spiritual practice.

I have experienced several unwelcome advances by monks in India who tried to coerce me into becoming a tantric consort, citing that the practice of tantric sex would be mutually beneficial as I would be helping the monk to attain enlightenment and he in turn, would lift me up spiritually, a prospect I found repulsive, to say the least! Simmer-Brown (2002: 227) further explains,

...tantric partnership is viewed as a particularly rich opportunity for both partners to develop realization. The intimacy of the relationship provides the setting for the sharing of wisdom, as the hagiographies attest. Reflecting this, the wives or consorts of *lamas* elicit instant respect in Tibetan²¹⁶ culture.

Fortunately, I am well aware of the criteria for tantric consort practice and knew that it is forbidden for monks and nuns.²¹⁷ Secondly, one has to receive the three recognitions²¹⁸ from one's guru who is usually a highly realized master before one is allowed to take a consort. Moreover, I am sufficiently empowered to know that

²¹⁶ This holds true in the Bhutanese context as well

²¹⁷ According to the Vinaya

²¹⁸ Contained in the tantric vows which one takes when one receives Highest Yoga Tantra (HYT) initiations, the contents of which is not allowed to be disseminated to non-initiates, thus, cannot be explained in this thesis

kārmamudrā is not the only way to enlightenment. For example, Gampopa, the great twelfth-century Kagyu master is believed to have attained full enlightenment while maintaining the monastic vows of celibacy. Also, Lama Tsongkhapa, the celibate monk-founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism waited until the moment of death to complete the ultimate realization of Buddhahood (Simmer-Brown, 2002: 247):

It is said that Tsongkhapa, the great advocate for literal observance of monastic vows, postponed full enlightenment until the moment of death, when he united with a consort in a visionary realm, thus completing his yogic discipline and attaining the rainbow body.

If only female practitioners in Bhutan, especially nuns knew of the exact criteria and conditions for the *kārmamudrā* and had access to the *Vinaya*, incidences of sexual exploitation could have been nipped in the bud. This is why women need to be fully empowered in Buddhist education!

7.10 Summary

The results of this thesis show that there are traditions, practices and symbolism of Vajrayāna Buddhist practice in Bhutan which serve to disempower women and induce psychological reliance on male authority. Traditions such as the belief that women are inferior to men; that female rebirth is a result of past evil karma and male birth is the result of good actions in previous lives; the innate impurity of women; symbols that disempower women as well as gendered designation of realised spiritual masters contribute to the subordination of Bhutanese nuns in the religious realm, as observed in the two study areas.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS—CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH TO POLICY AND ACADEMIA

8.1 Introduction

This study revealed that the roles of nuns in the two nunneries studied in Bhutan are largely gendered in a manner which denies nuns opportunities for personal development, empowerment and subsequently, opportunities to be able to be more socially engaged. Bhutanese nuns play a minimal role in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with because they are confined to doing simple prayers and are not yet empowered to teach, perform rites and rituals which can be of maximum benefit to the laypeople.

Nuns are still denied access to systematic monastic education which is largely available to monks in Bhutan and have issues with basic needs. Bhutanese nuns, especially in the government-supported nunnery have issues with securing basic needs. Nuns also have a low status in society which is linked to their being traditionally denied a monastic education and full ordination. It is largely due to such obstacles and lack of opportunities that Bhutanese nuns are still not fully empowered to propagate Buddhism in the communities where they reside.

This study also uncovered various reasons for the subordination of nuns but the primary and underlying contributing factor is the patriarchal monastic body which has traditionally focused on developing men's spiritual potential to the highest level while neglecting female Buddhist practitioners, especially nuns whose lives are governed by policies from these monastic bodies. The nuns rationalise that if they had been empowered with the knowledge and skills the monks possess in Bhutan, then issues pertaining to finances and misogyny would eventually disappear. Once nuns receive equal

opportunities for spiritual development, only then can the gender barriers be broken down.

8.2 Bhutanese nuns' level of empowerment to contribute to the propagation of Buddhism in their communities

Objective 1: To gauge the level of empowerment of Vajrayāna Buddhist nuns in religious practice in Bhutan, especially in terms of monastic education;

Research Question 1: Are the Bhutanese nuns sufficiently empowered to be able to practice the Vajrayāna Buddhist spiritual path and attain realisations?

This study revealed that Bhutanese nuns in the two nunneries studied have minimum monastic education and do not have access to the full three-tier monastic study programme compared to their monk counterparts in Bhutan. Nuns at best, e.g. in Jachung Karmo, perform prayers for the sick, deceased etc. They have limited knowledge of the dharma and usually only do their own practice, prayers and chores at their nunneries. Nuns at Jachung Karmo are largely known as good *Nyungne* fasting practitioners while nuns at the Jashar Goenpa are beginning to be known as good meditators because of the opportunities to enter into solitary retreat for three, six, nine years etc. As explained in detail in the preceding chapters, nuns in both nunneries lack empowerment mainly because they are denied access to the full monastic education based on the Five Sciences of Knowledge.

Teaching opportunities and leadership roles: Most teachers in the monasteries and nunneries in the two study areas are men (either monks or laymen) because nuns lack access to monastic education and training in rites and rituals (which have been denied to nuns for generations). Nuns who are qualified to teach (e.g. those who have completed retreat in Jashar Goenpa) have no confidence to teach as Bhutanese society is not

accustomed to women religious teachers. Nuns are reduced to performing simple prayers and performing chores for the nunneries.

Nuns are denied any leadership roles in the larger monastic body, i.e. the Dratshang Lhentshog (Commission for the Monastic Affairs), and the Zhung Dratshang (Central Monastic Body). The only place where nuns have a glimmer of hope for leadership roles is in their respective nunneries, and that too because nuns and monks are not supposed to live together (except for one or two male teachers as female teachers are unavailable).

8.2.1 Conclusions for Objective 1

Traditionally boys in Bhutan are given religious education in monasteries and secular education in the schools. This study has found this status-quo remains to this day as the Drukpa Kagyu theocracy, headed by the Dratshang Lhentshog and operationalised by the Zhung Dratsang have done little to uplift the status of the nuns in Bhutan, especially in terms of access to monastic education. None of the government sponsored nunneries has access to the full three-tiered traditional educational structure of *lobdra*, *shedra* and *drubdra*. Only one nunnery, Kila Goenpa has a *shedra*. Despite seemingly having equal opportunities in the secular realm, monastic education is by and large, not available to nuns in government sponsored nunneries. This situation is beginning to change for the private nunneries which are headed by individual spiritual masters who solicit external funding, but there is still a lack of institutional will to improve educational facilities for Bhutanese nuns in government nunneries.

In contrast, the monks in the study areas in both Western and Eastern Bhutan have all the facilities from large monasteries to live in, sufficient food to eat and access to education with full facilities even to learn computer and English so that they can sustain themselves if they come out of the monastery. On the other hand the nuns have little access to education and they have no proper place to live. Nuns do not have the support

from the government and receive little support from the private sector for even basic needs such as food, water and electricity. The symbolism of Vajrayāna Buddhist practice in Bhutan such as the phallus, spiritual consort, *terton*, *trulku* and Rinpoche also serves to disempower women and induce psychological reliance on male authority. Therefore, this study has found that there are traditions, practices and symbolism which do not support women's empowerment in the study area.

In Jachung Karmo nunnery in western Bhutan, the nuns receive minimal training in scriptures, rituals, symbolism and practices to be able to support the communities. They are taught basic prayers and very simple musical instruments that they cannot use much to fulfil the needs of people. Thus these nuns are not empowered to contribute to the propagation of Buddhism in the communities in which they live. Moreover, people in western Bhutan are very conservative and do not invite nuns to preside over funerals. Nuns at Jachung Karmo are virtually cut off from the local communities because the nunnery is up in the mountains with no road access. Hence, the nuns receive little sponsorship from the local communities, except for *Nyungne* practice to be conducted for deceased and sick relatives. Even male teachers refuse to travel to the nunnery to teach the nuns. The teacher (monk) was not teaching anything to the nuns.

The situation of the nuns at Jashar Goenpa, a private nunnery in the East is far better because they have permanent teachers (two laymen) to guide them in their daily practice of the rituals. When the nuns go out to peoples' houses they are led by their teachers and thus can do all the rituals which usually people think only monks can perform. They preside over funerals to conduct prayers which in the past only monks were invited.

Despite all the obstacles, the nuns at Jachung Karmo have grown to become well-known authentic practitioners of *Nyungne* in Western Bhutan whereas the nuns at Jashar

Goenpa are beginning to be respected by the local communities for their long time spent in retreat (meditation).

This study has also shown that powerful female imagery like Gelongma Palmo and Tāra have profound psychological impact on the nuns and have given the nuns the confidence to practice dharma sincerely against tremendous hardships. The *Nyungne* practice (at Jachung Karmo) based on an inspiring female personality has empowered these nuns and given them a distinct identity and importance in the region in which they live. These nuns have become relevant to the lives of the people whom they are closely connected with. Female imagery has helped these nuns to become leaders and masters in their desired spiritual practice, despite the fact that nuns have no access to the systematic monastic education of *lobdra*, *shedra* and *drubdra*.

This study has shown that despite being deprived of monastic education, Bhutanese nuns in the two study areas are slowly beginning to transcend gender barriers and centuries of cultural conditioning which does not recognise their inherent potential to practice dharma, gain realisations and benefit sentient beings through the dharma. This is possible due to sheer hard work and faith in the teachings. If nuns had access to monastic education, the nuns' self-confidence and knowledge would be elevated to such an extent which will make them extremely beneficial to the local communities they interact with. Once the recognition of nuns' potential is deeply rooted in the psyche of Bhutanese society, future generations of Bhutanese women do not need to aspire to be reborn as males to complete the stages of the twofold²¹⁹ path in order to liberate sentient beings from *samsāra*.

²¹⁹ Referring to the generation and completion stage of Vajrayāna Buddhist tantric practice.

8.3 Gendered Roles in Buddhist Religious Practice in Bhutan

The prevalence of gendered roles in Buddhist religious practice in both nunneries are inferred from significant activities, interactions, or incidences and how the nuns, monks and laypeople feel about their respective roles accorded to them by their socio-cultural environment by virtue of their physiological sex. The following are the summary of the findings for Objective 2:

Objective 2: To analyse the role of Bhutanese nuns in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with.

Research Question 2: Do Bhutanese nuns play a role in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with?

This study revealed that Bhutanese nuns in the two nunneries studied do interact with laypeople in formal settings but largely shy away from them. When they do interact, their role is mainly to perform prayers for the sick, deceased etc. Nuns at Jachung Karmo are largely known as good *Nyungne* fasting practice practitioners while nuns at the Jashar Goenpa are beginning to be known as good meditators because of the opportunities to enter into solitary retreat for three, six, nine years etc. In general, nuns do not hold esteemed positions unless they are reincarnations of past realised female masters.

From the interviews with the nuns, monks and laypeople connected to the two nunneries and from my observations at both nunneries, I make the following conclusions on the roles of the nuns in the following spheres:

- The main responsibility of the nuns is towards themselves, i.e. Personal practice of the dharma (Buddhist teachings), to practice to transform their minds and progress spiritually on the path to enlightenment.

- Secondary role: Nuns are sought after by the laity to conduct prayers (Tib: *shabten*) for the laity for rites of passage, (e.g. birth, death, marriage), sickness, obstacle-clearing, personal gain (business, studies), house and car blessing. However, only high-level monks (high *lamas* and Rinpoches) are sought after for annual *pūjā* (Dzongkha: *choeku*), new house completion and the consecration of land.

From interviews, personal observations and experience, I conclude that nuns' roles in the two nunneries studied are **gendered** in the following spheres of religious practice in Bhutan:

- Conferring of initiations: Only high *lamas* (who are almost always monks) give initiations as nuns are not qualified to do so due to lack of training and education (no retreat experience and permission from masters). Nuns are viewed as 'second-class *saṃgha*' as their status is lower than monks.
- Teaching opportunities: Most teachers in the monasteries and nunneries in the study areas are men (either monks or laymen) because nuns lack access to monastic education and training in rites and rituals (which have been denied to nuns for generations). Nuns who are qualified to teach (e.g. those who have completed retreat) have no confidence to teach as Bhutanese society is not accustomed to women religious teachers. Nuns are reduced to performing simple prayers and performing chores for the nunneries.
- Rites and rituals:
 - Nuns, especially in Western Bhutan are never sought by the laity to conduct the annual *pūjā* (Dzongkha: *choeku*) because nuns have no access to such training. Many *gomchens* get far better training (like reciting texts, doing *pūjās* complete with skills in using implements and hand *mudrās*). However, the laypeople in the

study areas are beginning to request nuns to conduct *choeku* due to lack of *samgha* to perform prayers. Nonetheless, the first preference is monks, not nuns.

- Nuns are never sought by the laity to lead prayers for the deceased (funeral ceremonies, cremation) and ground-breaking/land consecration ceremonies. Nuns at Jashar Goenpa perform such prayers only because they are accompanied by their male teachers.
- Ordination status: Most nuns in the two nunneries are not even ordained. Most are just dressed as nuns because the nuns are either not getting ordination from their masters or are not sure if they will remain as nuns in the future. This has a direct impact on the laity as the laity believes that the efficacy of prayers is more if nuns have ordination. In contrast, more monks are ordained and monks have access to full ordination which nuns in the Vajrayāna tradition do not have. Therefore, nuns are relegated to a status of “second-class” *samgha* with far lesser efficacy which limits their roles in the monastic institution and in society.
- Retreat opportunities: Only the nuns at Jashar Goenpa have opportunities to enter into solitary retreat for a period of three, six or nine years because they have the facilities and access to highly realized teachers. In contrast, the nuns at Jachung Karmo have no opportunities for personal development and largely remain in the nunnery doing prayers without proper religious instructions.
- Masked dance practices: Are largely performed by men because women have never been taught masked-dance practices. Nuns at Jashar Goenpa, especially those who have completed at least three years retreat are now beginning to be taught some masked-dance practices such as Kuntuzangpo'i Cham.

The people in the two study areas generally go to monks or *gomchen* for teachings, *maṅḍala* making, *thangka* stitching, and divination and to learn other aspects of the five

sciences²²⁰ because nuns in the study area have no access to these knowledges, thus remain largely irrelevant to the local communities except for their minimal role in performing simple prayers.

- Practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa (Tib: *Naro Choedrug*): In the past, some nuns like Anim Lopenma Paldon and Anim Woesel Chöden have learnt and practiced *tummo*²²¹ whereby nuns and laywomen became highly realized or even enlightened. However, in the present day, women have no opportunity to learn *tummo* because the present lineage holders are men and they are hesitant to teach women, especially not nuns due to sensitivity²²².
- Gendered designations:
 - *Trulku/Rinpoches*²²³: Reincarnated masters, known as *trulku* and bearing the designation Rinpoches are almost always identified with the male gender. Women Rinpoches are extremely rare in Bhutan. There is one female Rinpoche, Anim Trulku who is in training now at Jashar Goenpa and will be given the opportunity to confer initiations after completing the nine years retreat. Yet, she has not been officially enthroned, thus, does not hold the title ‘Rinpoche’. Most *trulkus* like Dorje Phagmo do not confer initiations although they are highly respected.
 - (Dzongkha: *Anim*): Bhutanese will call monks “*Gelong*” (Skt: *bhikṣu*) which refers to a fully-ordained monk, regardless of their ordination status. In contrast, nuns are always referred to as “Anim”, regardless of their ordination status.
 - (Tib: *Khandro*)²²⁴ (Skt: *Ḍāka*) and *Khandroma* (Skt: *Ḍākinī*): Identified with women, who are usually sought as spiritual consorts to elevate men’s enlightened

²²⁰ Five Sciences of Knowledge (Skt: *Pancavidya*) (Tib. *Rigpa Nga*): 1) Science of Language (Skt: *Śabdavidyā*) (Tib. *Dra Rigpa*); 2) Science of Logic (Skt: *Hetuvidyā*) (Tib. *Tshema Rigpa*); 3) Science of Medicine (Skt: *Cikitsāvidyā*) (Tib. *Sowa Rigpa*); 4) Science of Fine Arts and Crafts (Skt: *Śilakarmasthānavidyā*) (Tib. *Dzo Rigpa*); and 5) Science of Spirituality (Skt: *Adhyātmavidyā*) (Tib. *Nangdon Rigpa*). Monks learn astrology (5 knowledges/sciences).

²²¹ Practice of inner fire, one of the Six Yogas of Naropa which is a core Highest Yoga Tantra practice to be able to secure enlightenment in one lifetime.

²²² This practice must be done without wearing any clothes.

²²³ Literally translated as “Precious One”, refers to an incarnate master or *trulku*.

²²⁴ Literally translated as “Sky dancer/skyfarer”. It may also refer to a female Vajrayāna practitioner who manifests outer wisdom display and who possesses inner method nature.

experiences. The image of a *khandro* in the eyes of the Bhutanese, is of a woman, who is usually the spiritual consort of a Rinpoche or high *lama*.

- (Tib: *Gomchen*)²²⁵: Identified with the male gender. Female lay practitioners who do *pūjās* and rituals for laypeople also referred to as “Anim” with extra word “Gomchen” (though not all the time). Therefore, the image of great meditators in the eyes of the average Bhutanese is that of men although this image is slowly eroding amongst the local community associated with Jashar Goenpa in Eastern Bhutan.
- Emanations of Vajrayāna Buddhist deities: Although Buddhism espouses that gender is irrelevant in the enlightened experience, the emanation of male deities (such as Guru Padmasambhava) are always recognised in men and the emanation of female enlightened beings (such as Yeshe Tsogyal) in women. This further perpetuates gendered roles and relegates women to a subordinate position because the Bhutanese generally perceive male deities as having higher efficacy and hence, accorded higher status.
- *Terton*²²⁶: *Tertons* are usually associated with males as all past *tertons* in Bhutan, e.g. Terton Pema Lingpa Terma (1450–1521), the famous Nyingmapa saint was male. However, there is one female who was recently identified as a *terton* (small girl studying in Class 4 in a village who claims that she is Guru Padmasambhava).

8.3.1 Conclusions for Objective 2

This study revealed that the roles of nuns in the two nunneries studied in Bhutan are largely gendered in a manner which denies nuns opportunities for personal development, empowerment and subsequently, opportunities to be able to be more socially engaged.

²²⁵ Literally translated as “advanced meditator”

²²⁶ Literally translated as “treasure revealer”- refers to a person who identifies spiritual treasures hidden by past enlightened masters for future generations to practice.

With the current trend of gendered roles of nuns in the two nunneries, I conclude that Bhutanese nuns play a minimal role in shaping the cultural and religious values of the communities they interact with because they are confined to doing simple prayers and are not yet empowered to teach, perform rites and rituals which can be of maximum benefit to the laypeople. Nonetheless, there is a positive dimension of gendered roles for the nuns at Jachung Karmo as whenever the laity think of the fasting practice of *Nyungne*, nuns are the preferred choice to conduct the practice and the image of nuns as being able to meditate in solitary retreat is changing with the nuns of Jashar Goenpa being given the same opportunity as their male counterparts to enter into solitary retreat. Apart from gendered roles, there are also gendered designations which pave the way for gendered roles in religious practice in Bhutan. These gendered designations are very much ingrained in the psyche of the Bhutanese in the study area that the deconstruction of gendered roles can only begin when nuns are empowered in all the five knowledges required to suit the needs of the local people and religious practice.

8.4 Aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhist practice in Bhutan that support women's empowerment and those that do not

Objective 3: To analyse the traditions, practices, scriptures, and symbolism of Vajrayāna Buddhism that support women's empowerment and those that do not in order to understand the key factors which contribute to gender discrimination in religious practice in Bhutan.

Research Question 3: What are the aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhist institutionalism, traditions, practices, scriptures, and symbolism in Bhutan that support women's empowerment and those that do not?

This study found that there are certain aspects of Vajrayāna Buddhist practices, traditions and symbolism which influence the empowerment of Bhutanese women, in particular, Bhutanese nuns. The overarching power of the patriarchal Drukpa Kagyu theocracy, headed by the Dratshang Lhentshog (Commission for the Monastic Affairs) and operationalised by the Zhung Dratshang (the monastic body) which provides the religious and social base of the contemporary Bhutanese social structure and its practices have impacted the empowerment of Bhutanese nuns in religious practice, often in a manner which deprives nuns from full rights to self-determination and educational opportunities. The following is a summary of areas where Bhutanese nuns lack empowerment as a direct result of Vajrayāna Buddhist practices in Bhutan:

- Monastic/religious education [the Five Sciences of Knowledge]: The primary cause of the lack of empowerment in religious practice, as revealed by the nuns in the two nunneries studied is access to religious education. Firstly, there is no syllabus for the religious education of Buddhist nuns in Bhutan. The Dratshang Lhentshog, which oversees the religious education of monks in Bhutan in a highly systematic manner, has yet to introduce a study programme, i.e. no *shedra* for nuns at Jachung Karmo. All government-run monasteries and nunneries in Bhutan are under the purview of Dratshang Lhentshog. Nuns at Jashar Goenpa, a private nunnery, is yet to have a *shedra* but have *lobdra* and *drubdra* but there are plans to set up a *shedra* with a systematic study programme in the next couple of years.

Nuns do not have access to teachers who have to travel to their remote nunneries, often battling with harsh weather, travel and living conditions with little financial incentive to teach the nuns. Due to the lack of interest of monks to travel to the remote regions where the nunneries are located, Buddhist monastic education as outlined by Dratshang Lhentshog remains inaccessible to nuns in government-run

nunneries in Bhutan like Jachung Karmo. The nuns in private-run nunneries like Jashar Goenpa nuns, due to the initiative of the respective Rinpoches who solicit funds from outside of Bhutan, mainly from Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia are now beginning to introduce a study programme for the nuns. The nuns at Jashar Goenpa also have a structured retreat curriculum spanning nine years.

- Sacred Dances, Ritual Arts, and conferring of initiations: In general, Bhutanese nuns in the study area are not fully empowered to perform rites and rituals such as the annual pūjā (Dzongkha: *choeku*), masked dances (Tib: *cham*) and Naga pūjās. Nuns are definitely not empowered to confer initiations. The nuns and monks interviewed in this study attribute this to lack of training for the nuns in these rituals as they are denied access to the full and systematic education on the Five Sciences of Knowledge which cover these skills. They are also not fully empowered to teach the dharma to the local people due to lack of knowledge and teaching skill.
- Tantric Practices (specifically Six Yogas of Naropa, Tib: *Naro Chödrug*): None of the nuns at Jachung Karmo have access to tantric teachings at the nunnery. Although their late Abbess, Anim Lopenma Paldon was adept at Six Yogas of Naropa, she did not transmit this teaching to her disciples and subsequent teachers.

Women in Bhutan in the present day have no opportunity to learn *tummo* because the present lineage holders are men and they are hesitant to teach women, especially not nuns due to sensitivity²²⁷. From my observation, the male masters are unwilling to explore alternative modes of dressing to overcome the sensitivities of the practice. Alternatively, Bhutanese nuns could seek the *tummo* lineage from their fellow sisters in Tibet who still hold the lineage. These options have not been explored. Lack of proactive action on the part of male masters who oversee the spiritual development of the nuns under their care

²²⁷ This practice is usually done by men without wearing any clothes.

has caused women to be denied equal opportunity to practice the full spectrum of Buddhist monastic education and meditation as is available to monks in the present day.

- Ordination status: Full ordination for nuns is non-existent in Bhutan and the subject of full ordination for nuns is not even being considered by the Dratshang Lhentshog, compared with vigorous discussions and conferences held by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa in India on this issue. Most nuns in the two nunneries studied are not even ordained. Most are just dressed as nuns because the nuns are either not getting ordination from their masters. Although many of the monks interviewed support full ordination for nuns, they are hesitant to be involved in the ordination unless the highest clergy in Bhutan, Je Khenpo and his Dratshang Lhentshog decree that full ordination for nuns in Bhutan is allowed. Other monks play down the importance for full ordination of the nuns saying that if it is important, the high *lamas* would have surely instituted (or rather, re-instituted²²⁸) full ordination for the nuns. Some monks suggest that nuns can go out of the country, e.g. to Taiwan, China, Korea and Vietnam where full ordination in the Mahāyāna tradition is available.

As for the nuns at Jachung Karmo, all the nuns agree that higher (full) ordination (Skt: *bhikṣuṇī*, Tib: *gelongma*) is very important and if given a chance they want to be fully ordained nuns because they believe that the merit of their practice will be higher and they can benefit many sentient beings and themselves due to constant reminders to keep their precepts. However, very few nuns have *śramaṇerikā* (Tib: *getsulma*). Moreover, some have not even taken the refuge vows and lay vows (Tib: *genyen dompa*).

²²⁸ Note that most scholars and Vajrayāna Buddhist clergy believe that full-ordination never reached Tibet and Bhutan although some sources dispute this theory.

The nuns at Jashar Goenpa also know the importance of full ordination. Many nuns feel it is important to go for full ordination and have expressed their desire to be fully ordained. Some nuns maintain that they do not need to be ordained in order to practice well. This is a direct influence of patriarchal values on the mindset of Bhutanese women. Note that full-ordination for a man is considered very important in Vajrayāna Buddhism. Also, full ordination for women is highly recommended by the historical Buddha but its importance to women has been diluted in Vajrayāna Buddhism in Bhutan.

- Perceptions of the female body: There is a general worldview of the limitations of a female body amongst the monks, nuns and laypeople interviewed in the study area shaped by generations of patriarchal cultural conditioning. The idea that being born in a female body is a result of bad karma is upheld by many of those interviewed (with no particular difference in the patterns of responses by monks, nuns and laypeople). Also, the locals in the study area believe that women are nine times more inferior than men. Many nuns, especially those who have had hard lives on the basis of their female bodies in their formative years, aspire to be reborn in a male body in their future lives, which I have established is a result of patriarchal propaganda since early Buddhism. This study revealed that the more one understands the Buddha's teachings about the irrelevance of gender in attaining full enlightenment, the less the tendency to view the female body in a negative light. For nuns who have no access to the Buddha's teachings, this worldview translates as a shackle for personal development and self-confidence. For example, some of the nuns interviewed at Jachung Karmo said that nuns should not hold equal position as monks because they feel that nuns are nine times lower than monks and cannot perform the rituals equally. This type of virulent thinking, attributed to the patriarchal monastic culture in Bhutan is an impediment for the empowerment of

women in religious practice and social engagement with the local communities. However, Bhutanese women in my study area lead harder lives as laywomen which I have demonstrated. This induces women to become nuns to escape the drudgery of labour and the re-productive role in the household. Therefore, many nuns in both nunneries expressed great relief and good fortune to be able to become nuns to not only escape the seemingly vicious-cycle of subordination of women in lay life, but more importantly, to be given the opportunity to be able to devote their whole lives to practice the path to spiritual enlightenment. Nuns also said that they were far more fortunate than even laymen who have to struggle to provide for their families.

- Symbolism and positions of power: The image of Guru (Tib: *lama*) as male with a higher spiritual realisation versus *khandro*, a mere spiritual consort, exclusively associated with women. The connotations that Rinpoche, Trulku and Gomchen is almost always male. Prominent past Buddhist figures such as Guru Rinpoche, Drukpa Kunlay (Bhutan's most powerful saint, the holy madman), Tertön Pema Lingpa (a native holy text discoverer and ancestor of the royal family), and Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (the founding father of Bhutan) are male, with the exception of Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal, who was the spiritual consort of Guru Rinpoche. The country is ruled by a King and the head of the Dratshang Lhentshog and Je Khenpo, a monk. The Five Lopons of the Zhung Dratshang (Central Monastic Body); and the Secretary of the Dratshang Lhentshog who is a civil servant, abbots and teachers in Bhutan are male.
- Female imagery: This study also found some very positive symbolism/imagery which contributes to the Bhutanese nuns' confidence in their spiritual ability to become fully enlightened beings. Nuns draw inspiration from enlightened female role models such as Tāra (Tib: Drolma) and Gelongma Palmo (Skt: *Bhikṣuṇī* Lakṣmī), whom the nuns meditate on during the *Nyungne* fasting practice at

Jachung Karmo in Western Bhutan. Although some of the nuns interviewed in both nunneries said that there is no difference whether there is a female image or not, most of the nuns said that the female imagery in Vajrayāna Buddhism provides inspiration for their practice and gives them hope that women also can achieve enlightenment. Some added that if there were no female images, then they would think that the dharma is only for men. As a consequence of such female Buddha symbols, most of the nuns said that females can achieve enlightenment in the female body as long as one practices sincerely because enlightenment is contingent upon the mind, which is genderless, and not on the physical body.

8.4.1 Conclusions for Objective 3

This study has highlighted several sources of subordination of nuns but recognises the patriarchal Dratshang Lhentshog (Commission for the Monastic Affairs) and the Zhung Dratshang (the monastic body) as the institutions which primarily perpetuate the subordination of nuns. Bhutanese nuns are denied access to monastic education, i.e. the nuns do not have the same opportunity as monks to not only learn Buddhist Philosophy, but also the rites and rituals to perform prayers for the people. These monastic institutions have done little in the last two centuries since its establishment to address the basic and spiritual needs of the nuns. These institutions have chosen to overlook the spiritual development of nuns in favour of the monks, thereby maintaining the status-quo. These institutions have failed to provide equal access to monastic education to the nuns and have not addressed the low status of the nuns in the eyes of the Bhutanese society, which is primarily due to lack of education and their low ordination status (no access to full ordination).

The traditions and elements of Vajrayāna Buddhist practices and symbolism also contribute to the subordination of Bhutanese women in general but it is offset by powerful

Buddhist doctrines and imagery which discards the dichotomy of male/female and renders gender as ultimately irrelevant to gaining spiritual realisations. I also discovered that nuns are being subjected to male domination due to their financial dependence on monastic institutions, which are predominantly male because the nuns find it difficult to support themselves as the Bhutanese society is culturally and (religiously) conditioned to accord higher status to the monks than nuns. The Bhutanese believe that donating to monks earns greater merit than giving to the nuns. In summary, although there are various contributory factors to the subordination of nuns, including the disunity between the nuns themselves and the conservative views of the nuns of their rights to self-determination and personal development, these are but minor sources of subordination compared with the patriarchal monastic body and its androcentric policies which have kept Bhutanese nuns entrenched in low status and total dependence on the monks for the spiritual and financial well-being for generations. Until the monastic body institutes policy changes from the Dratshang Lhentshog, Bhutanese nuns would continue to be sidelined in monastic education, especially nuns who belong to government-sponsored nunneries.

8.5 Recommendations for policy and future research

Since the most pressing issue highlighted in this thesis is the lack of access to the three-tier monastic education system, i.e. *lobdra*, *drubdra* and *shedra*, there is an urgent need for the Bhutanese government to address the empowerment of nuns through monastic education. There should be a systematic education system with competent teachers in place for nuns at government-run nunneries. As for the private-run nunneries, there is a need for the government to recognise the degrees of the nuns that have graduated from the nine years' *shedra* study programme. Time has come to integrate the study systems in the government and private-run nunneries to streamline monastic education in Bhutan, as is the practice in monasteries and nunneries in India and Nepal.

Also, the government should tap the resources of the nun graduates from private nunneries within Bhutan and other nunnery institutes in India and Nepal where scores of Bhutanese nuns are studying to give them the opportunity to serve their country. At present, there is vast pool of qualified nuns but few are recruited and sent to nunneries, especially government-run nunneries to assist in setting up monastic study programmes there. By tapping on the resources of these nun graduates, the Bhutanese government would also be able to solve the issue of shortage of teachers at nunneries and reduce in part, incidences of sexual abuse by male teachers, prevalent in nunneries in Bhutan.

The Bhutanese government should also look into the needs of middle-aged and elderly nuns, those who feel that they are too old to undergo the three-tier monastic study programme and yet, wish to make the most of monastic life through meditation practice. At present, these senior nuns are still made to work in nunneries after having spent years serving the nunneries. They need time and a conducive place to enter into retreat. The Bhutanese government would be doing a great service to these nuns by creating more retreat facilities for them and assist them in their sustenance during the tenure of their retreat.

The condition of the existing nunneries is far from desirable, with lack of access to roads, electricity, water, toilets and proper sewage system. This takes up much of the nuns' time as they have to walk far to collect firewood for cooking, to fetch water and this impinges on their study and practice time. Hence, also high on the agenda for the betterment of nuns is the improvement of basic infrastructure, utilities, water and sanitation facilities. Attention also needs to be paid to the nutrition and healthcare facilities of the nuns as nuns lack a balanced diet due to issues with basic sustenance. Basic health units (BHU) in Bhutan are located near villages which are far from nunneries and there are no clinics or trained medical personnel stationed at the nunneries. Another important issue which needs immediate attention is the high incidences of sexual abuse.

The government, through the Dratshang Lhentshog must provide the nuns with a grievance mechanism to report any incidences of abuse, violence or any problem which needs the intervention of a third party arbitrator. Since many nuns remain silent out of fear of reprisals from nunnery authorities, it is crucial that there is a system which ensures the anonymity of the complainant and addresses grievances in a timely and professional manner. This grievance mechanism has to be effectively communicated to the nuns and standardised across the country.

The Bhutanese government and civil society also have a role to play in ensuring that nuns' capacity are built in many other areas, for example, in improving their basic literacy in Dzongkha, English language skills, public speaking, counselling and computer skills; and awareness-raising programmes on hygiene and basic sanitation, sexual harassment and its corresponding grievance mechanism, sexually transmitted diseases and other relevant training which can help empower the nuns to be better practitioners and serve their local communities.

It is heartening to note that changes in policy have already begun to be seen in Bhutan as a result of preliminary findings from this thesis. As a direct consequence of the conference paper I presented at the 1st International Nuns Conference in Paro, Bhutan in 2013 and my private audience with Her Majesty Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck, the Queen Mother, 143 nuns received *getsulma* ordination on 10 May 2014 organised by the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation. This has in part addressed the need to uplift the status of the nuns in Bhutan through ordination. It is envisaged that when the nuns in India begin to receive full or *gelongma* ordination, Bhutan would follow suit, as a natural consequence of changes in the Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist world.

8.6 Recommendations for future research

One of the most glaring gaps in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism, or Buddhism in general, is the absence of women from religious literature. Either their stories are embedded in

religious liturgy or remain in oral form, in the collective memory of the people where these female masters hailed from. Therefore, it is imperative that more studies are conducted to uncover these hidden biographies, often still untranslated from their native languages. There is a need for more biographies and hagiographies of women to be uncovered and translated into the English language.

Also, Buddhist scholars have tended to focus on textual analysis, often overlooking Buddhism as it is lived. Therefore, in order to reflect the actual practices, especially impact studies, there is a need to employ ethnographic approach in the field. These studies can help to bridge the gap between textual Buddhism and living Buddhism. In the case of female masters, many stories of female masters have not been documented and remain in oral form and known only to local communities where these female masters lived. More scholarly work is needed to document the lives of these female masters and this can only be done through ethnographic studies in the field. Urgent attention needs to be given to documenting the lives of female masters before their stories are lost in the midsts of time.

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