

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MONASTIC EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF BUDDHIST NUNS IN BHUTAN

Sonam Wangmo & Juli Edo¹

Abstract

Bhutanese nuns have for centuries remained as bystanders and watched the male clergy progress intellectually, spiritually, and materially. Where monastic education is concerned, Bhutan has traditionally educated its boys through a systematic education on Buddhist philosophy. Bhutanese nuns on the other hand have been deprived of monastic education and continue to be destitute as the country's sweeping educational reforms have yet to permeate into the monastic institution. The article examines Bhutanese nuns' access to religious instructions, especially monastic education in Buddhist philosophy which is the foundation of any Vajrayāna Buddhist practice. It also analyses whether Bhutanese nuns are sufficiently empowered to be able to practice the Vajrayāna Buddhist spiritual path and attain realisation. It was found that the lack of access to the full spectrum of monastic education coupled with the overwhelming power of tradition has severely hampered the spiritual and intellectual progress of the Bhutanese nuns. Grounded in the Feminist Buddhist approach, this article aims to highlight the issues surrounding Bhutanese nuns' intellectual and spiritual progress with a view to invoke policy changes on women and religious practice in the country.

Keywords: Bhutanese nuns, Vajrayāna Buddhism, gender, patriarchy, monastic education

Introduction

Before the introduction of modern secular education in Bhutan, the monastic education system, 'was accessible only to monks and a few privileged families. Women were excluded, with the exception of a few nuns' (Penjore 2005: 60). Interestingly, as with monks, young girls were sent to the nunneries by their parents to secure some education. However, there were no study programmes whereby the nuns could learn Buddhism and realise the highest teachings of Buddha. At best, nuns were taught some basic literacy by older nuns just to be able to recite religious texts and chant mantras. Nuns merely recited texts but were unable to comprehend the deeper meaning of the scriptures. As a result, nuns and laywomen wanting to learn Buddhism had little choice but to study in India or Nepal where study programmes were available to them.

The gender disparities in terms of Buddhist education in Bhutan were evident even from the time of Dorje Lingpa in 1370 AD (Karmay 2000). Dorje Lingpa, a foremost Bhutanese religious master noted that nuns' Buddhist knowledge was extremely poor. Once, he was requested for religious instructions (Tib: *dampa*) by a group of nuns in Punakha who had no access to teachings. Out of compassion, he taught the nuns accordingly, without discrimination (Karmay 2000: 4). The situation has improved in the last decade, albeit slightly with the introduction of study programmes for the nuns initiated by Ashi Tsering Yangdon, the Queen Mother of Bhutan and individual *lamas*² who run private nunneries in Bhutan. However, most of the nuns in Bhutan, especially in the rural areas still do not have access to a systematic monastic education.

This article is aimed at understanding the dynamics of monastic education for nuns in Bhutan. 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 to improve access to monastic education to elevate the status of nuns in my home country.

Literature Review of Nuns' Education in Bhutan

There is much literature and critique on monastic education in Bhutan (Phuntsho 2005; Denman & Namgyel, 2008) but only Denman and Namgyel (2008) mentioned nuns' education, with just a single paragraph attributed to nuns in terms of lack of support for private nunneries providing monastic education to nuns. The other articles focused only on monks' education. Phuntsho (2005) conducted a comparative study between traditional monastic (religious) education and secular education. He analysed the history and future trend of monastic education in Bhutan as well as the corresponding impact on traditional education posed by modern education. However, Phuntsho's work did not consider nun's monastic education at all. 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). Zangmo's (2009) study on Bhutanese nuns focused on nuns' education and their contribution to Gross National Happiness (GNH). My study, on the other hand, focuses on access to monastic education for Bhutanese nuns and their corresponding level of empowerment in religious practices, challenges and impacts arising from the current educational system at the nunneries studied. This article also uncovers the reasons for Bhutanese nuns' lack of access to education, relegating them to a subordinate position in the monastic hierarchy in Bhutan and resulting in reduced opportunities for nuns' spiritual development.

Theoretical Framework, Methodology and Research Setting

I have chosen to adopt the Feminist Buddhist approach as the basic framework to understand the issues surrounding Bhutanese nuns' access to monastic education. Feminist Buddhist approaches demonstrate how men are privileged over women; in the case of this study, nuns, and how a hierarchy is formed in the monastic institutions. This hierarchy translates into unequal power relationship between nuns and monks, resulting in the subordination of nuns by monks and loss of opportunities for nuns in terms of monastic education and spiritual practice.

I utilised ethnography to understand the dynamics surrounding religious education for nuns in two nunneries³; one in the Eastern and the other in the Western portion of Bhutan. The

duration⁴ of the study in each nunnery was two months, totalling four months of continuous field research.

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 Pema Gatsel, which is a private-run nunnery. The rationale for the site selection is that these two regions have the largest concentration of monastic institutions, including nunneries. Moreover, the western and eastern part of Bhutan are distinctly different, with different languages and ethnic groups. Furthermore, these two regions are mutually exclusive in religious affairs. Therefore, a comparison between the nunneries of these very diverse regions is essential to provide a broader picture on the actual situation of Bhutanese nuns.⁵

Centuries of Deprivation of Himalayan Buddhist Nuns

Himalayan women face discrimination in virtually all spheres of life. Campbell (1996) observed that women in Tibetan Buddhism are generally discriminated against in terms of access to monastic education, full ordination, ritual training, teaching roles and financial support for their 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 (2007:151) 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 home⁶

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 had neither education nor leadership roles in religious practice, social and political life. Women in Tibet and elsewhere in the Himalayas have also been denied access to monastic education. According to Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, a highly realised contemporary Western nun, '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 2009:1). In present times, the situation has not significantly changed. The situation of women in Bhutan is almost similar to most areas of the Tibetan diaspora (Gutschow 2004; Tsomo 2009; Zangmo 2009).

Results and Discussion: Level of Empowerment of the Nuns of Jachung Karmo

This study reveals that the nuns at Jachung Karmo do not have a systematic monastic study programme. All seven senior nuns at Jachung Karmo were well-versed 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*⁷ and playing of musical instruments which accompany these rituals. These nuns at the most learn to read and memorize the prayer texts from the senior-most nuns which they use in their daily congregational prayers. Some of them had the opportunity to learn basic implements and musical instruments like the *vajra*⁸, bell and drum. Most of the senior nuns learnt these from other institutions; either in India or at secular schools and then taught the others who were illiterate. Other than the recitation and memorization of certain prayer texts, the nuns know practically nothing else, except for Karma Yangzom⁹ who managed to complete her preliminary practice (Tib: *ngondro*) for a few months and Namgay Zangmo, who is by far the most empowered of all the senior nuns in terms of the number of oral transmissions (Tib: *thri*) and initiations (Tib: *wang*) received which endows her to engage in spiritual practices more effectively.

During my interviews with the nuns, it was evident that they were sadly lacking in basic Buddhist knowledge. 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 and the Noble Eightfold Path. Many of the nuns, especially the young ones were unaware of the significance of the Triple Gems¹⁰ of Buddhism (Tib: *konchog sum*). Moreover, the nuns have little idea about their monastic code of conduct—the *Vinaya* as most of them are not ordained or were not taught, not even by their preceptor, about the rules they are supposed to follow as novice nuns (Tib: *getsulma*; Skt: *śrāmaṇerikā*). 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, these nuns still do not have the opportunity to secure any of the three-tier religious education¹¹ viz. *lobdra*, *shedra* and *drubdra* which is freely available to monks in government monasteries in Bhutan. From the Feminist Buddhist perspective, the privilege accorded to male clergy and the lack of opportunities accorded to the nuns relegates female renunciants to the lowest rung of the monastic hierarchy, thereby entrenching the nuns in a subordinate position, further perpetuating gendered roles in the monastic institution.

Despite the overall gloomy scenario, 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.

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 resulting in a hybrid practice called 'Ka-Nying' since they began receiving a monthly stipend for thirty nuns from the Dratshang Lhenstshog.

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 Rinpoche¹² 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.

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: *ganachakra*) 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*¹³. In a somewhat reversed scenario from other parts of Bhutan; it is the nuns instead of monks who are invited to perform prayers (Dzongkha: *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 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 the nuns from Jashar Goenpa were 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. The Bhutanese, like other Himalayan range Buddhists feel that male practitioners (monks and male yogis) have a greater efficacy than nuns, probably due to the former's higher levels of spiritual and monastic training (Gutschow 2004).

In terms of religious education, all nuns receive 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 *Choechod*, rites and rituals and hand *mudrās* (gestures) 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 taught the nuns alphabets, spelling (Tib: *yorlog*), reading (Dzongkha: *tshigdu*), and memorization (Tib: *chorjang*) of texts. The nuns also commenced their learning of Orthography (Dzongkha: *dayig*) from another *gomchen* teacher, an ex-monk from Trashigang Dzong.

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: *thri*) from their Rinpoche whenever he visits them. Some nuns have undergone the six-year retreat under the guidance of their Rinpoche—a major spiritual accomplishment in Vajrayāna Buddhism 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 the breaking down of centuries of gender barriers in religious practice in Bhutan. There is ongoing training for the

Jashar nuns on *Kuntuzangpo'i Cham* (religious dance) 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 mandala making or sacred dance' (Gutschow 2004: 207), which is indeed a breakthrough.

Anim Trulku, an 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 Chöden¹⁴'s responsibility of the 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*¹⁵ to grant such initiations to her fellow nuns. Some of these teachings such as the *Six Yogas of Naropa* have not been bestowed on nuns in this era although there were nuns who received and practiced it in the past and even achieved much more profound realizations than male practitioners.

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' of *shedra* before one is finally admitted to 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, Gangteng¹⁶ 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. GangtengTulku Rinpoche¹⁷

The first batch of eight nuns who graduated in 2011 have 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 the abbess, 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 Lhentshog¹⁸ and did not follow the government *shedra* system. 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.

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, the late abbess 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, the Zangskari nuns who were deemed 'unfit to transmit the [Vajrayogini] 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. Yet, for reasons best known to her, she chose not to. 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 grounds¹⁹, the nuns were not taught anything more than reading, reciting and practicing *Nyungne*. She was outstanding in the practice of *Naro Choedruk*²⁰ under her master Lama Sonam Zangpo in Hongtso Tashigang, Thimphu district and also under her master Druptob Tsam Kelzang. Of the eight nuns who were given the transmission including Anim Lopenma Paldon and his monk students, Anim Lopenma proved to be the best of them all. Regrettably, Anim Lopenma practiced in secret and never shared her knowledge with any of the nuns.

Despite not transmitting anything more than *Nyungne*, Anim Lopenma's nuns faithfully stayed by her side, 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. 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 Karma Yangzom 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 (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 cite some excuse or other saying that they are busy, e.g. they have to go somewhere for urgent matters, are not available or 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 uncompetitive 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*), whereby *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.

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'.²¹ It is ironic that even after six centuries, the situation that the Jachung Karmo nuns are in is remarkably similar to that of 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)

Another challenge the nuns at Jachung Karmo face is that they do not have access to the systematic monastic education or *shedra* as 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 study curriculum²² and no opportunities to take government exams that correspond to the *lobdra* level. Zangmo (2009) asserts that the 'lessons taught were loosely-organized basic reading and writing'. 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 seem to be the only form of religious education for the Jachung Karmo nuns.

Since Jachung Karmo is a remote nunnery, ideal for meditation practice and used by great meditators²³; it should at the very least function as a *drubdra*. Yet, 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. 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 2010: 224).

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*. Access to *wang* in Bhutan is rare, especially if it is from high *lamas* like the Je Khenpo²⁴, and Namkhai Nyingpo.

Of the seven senior nuns during my fieldwork, only three stayed on in the nunnery, joined later by another two nuns from another 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 Karma Yangzom, in a follow-up visit to Bhutan in 2014, the nuns left the nunnery mainly because of the persistent lack of qualified teachers.

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 Dorji Wangmo said:

We learn *dayig* from our *gomchen* teacher.... our constraint is in understanding the meaning [of the text].

Another challenge for the nuns' monastic education in Jashar Goenpa is to balance their daily classes with the need to serve their communities (which ensures the nunnery's sustenance). The incessant *shabten* trips are no doubt crucial training ground for the nuns to serve their communities which also benefits 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.

Confidence Levels in Teaching and Performing Rituals

The nuns at both Jachung Karmo and Jashar Goenpa have thus far not been requested by the local communities to teach dharma²⁵, hence, any discussion on this subject is purely hypothetical, except for the senior-most nun who does most of the teaching at Jachung Karmo. She was the only nun teacher during my fieldwork in both nunneries. Since Anim Lopenma's demise, Namgay Zangmo 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 Goenpa²⁶ in Paro to teach but encountered some personal obstacles:

I was there for a week teaching *namjom* and *drama* but my mother fell ill and I had to return 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. Chime Dema said,

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 echoed Tashi Paldron'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 [teach] and many nuns are qualified since it all depends on our minds. If we are able to study and practice dharma, we can definitely teach just as well as the monks.

Despite her optimism of women's innate ability to grasp the dharma and excel in religious education, Tashi Paldron was concerned about androcentric cultural norms fuelled by patriarchal values; that transmission of religious ideas is a male prerogative which would ultimately dictate whether females are accepted as teachers in their own right:

I think we will have constraints to teach due to lack of acceptance by the laity since we are female.

The senior nuns were also perturbed by public opinion, which I suspect, is caused by inferiority complex:

We worry that people would speak ill of nuns who teach the dharma since there are sufficient learned monks to teach. The laity invites us to recite sutras and prayers like Tara, *Nyungne*, etc. We oblige but do not teach them dharma as we worry that people might say bad things like 'being a woman she is trying to teach us' etc.

Karma Yuden was quick to intervene and insisted 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 to teach.

...nuns are not equipped with the dharma knowledge that is taught to monks. Moreover, nuns' education began only recently.

Yangchen Lhamo, a senior nun also disagreed 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 with little 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 listen to the nuns. From my observation I think it is not entirely true. There are people who are good and say that nuns are more reliable than monks because some monks chase after high status and rich peoples' houses to perform prayers and rituals to procure better offerings.

The nuns at Jashar Goenpa are in complete agreement with their Western Bhutanese sisters, and believe in the capability of women teaching the dharma. However, one nun felt that she would not be up to the task:

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 task is partly reinforced through capacity building training organised by the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation (BNF). Karma Yangzom, who attended one such motivational talk in Paro in 2011 expressed full confidence in the ability of the nuns to teach, and I quote:

I feel that nuns are qualified to 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 perform all the activities which laymen and monks do.

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:

Rinpoche always tell us that nuns can and should teach and I also feel it is very true. Yet, thus far, I haven't heard of any nun in Pema Gatshel teaching other nuns and lay people. I don't think nuns would face any constraints in teaching the dharma. Instead, the laity would be proud that the nuns are doing well without cheating others.

Nyima Woesel

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 on the basis of gender when it comes to helping sentient beings:

In Buddhism we have *shepa*²⁷ and *drupa*²⁸. For the nuns I think *shepa* 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 tremendously.

Moreover, the monks did not think that the nuns face any constraints in contributing their knowledge and ritual expertise to society though they agreed that the nuns did face constraints in the past as people did not accept nuns. From the monks' point of view, the nuns would be well-accepted by the laity so long as they are capable.

In addition, the teachers at Jashar Goenpa opined that the nuns must have sufficient monastic education to benefit the laity, suggesting that the nuns should at the very least learn *Rigney Chewa Nga*²⁹ and *Chungwa Nga*³⁰ 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:

Nuns should give teachings and good advice to the laity. Otherwise, of what use are they?

Tsering Palmo

Nuns should and are capable of helping society. Even laymen and women are given equal rights in everything by our fourth King. The people prematurely conclude by saying that nuns are not capable before giving the nuns any responsibility. One's capability depends on the individual. We have to examine by giving them responsibilities.

An ex-minister

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.

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 against the nuns:

Yes, nuns should hold equal positions but the monks and laity are not giving the opportunity to the nuns.

Sonam Dekyi

Others use the charming comparison of androgyny to justify equality for all *sangha* since both monks and nuns do not differ in their appearance:

Absolutely! Nuns should hold equal positions because we are all wearing the same robes and have the same function in society.

Gyem Lham

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 sog*) which these young teenaged nuns see as a hindrance in achieving gender equality:

I don't think we should hold same position as monks because we have many hindrances.

Chime Dema

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 misogynistic ideas which have deprived women of their place in religion and their worth as equal human beings:

I do not think nuns should hold equal positions as monks because monks are nine times greater and higher in status than women. Moreover, women have to take five hundred rebirths to be reborn as male.

Tashi Palzom

Another common myth prevailing in Bhutanese society is that women should not perform the *Lamai' kuchoe* (death anniversary prayers for high *lamas*) and *choku* (annual prayers). This idea was regurgitated by the young nuns at Jachung Karmo when I asked them if they were aware of any religious practices which cannot be conducted by women. The senior nuns promptly rebutted this view, 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 surpass the monks.

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 capacity-building of the nuns over the last millennia. This gross neglect, as Feminist Buddhist scholars such as Gross (1993) and Gutschow (2004) suspect is linked to a contest for resources. 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, Pema Karpo actually recommended 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 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 were 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, the late

abbess of Jachung Karmo was a nun and she learnt *tummo* about five decades ago from a male teacher!

Conclusion

This study has found that the nuns at Jachung Karmo have no access to the traditional three-tier Bhutanese monastic study programme and hence, have correspondingly lower levels of empowerment in Buddhist practice compared to their Eastern counterparts, the nuns of Jashar Goenpa. The Jashar nuns have access to the *lobdra* and *drubdra* levels of religious training in Bhutan, but not the *shedra*—the systematic Buddhist philosophy study programme. The higher levels of empowerment of the Jashar nuns also correspondingly resulted in greater levels of local community acceptance which has made the nuns more relevant to their communities.

Nonetheless, I contend that even if nuns receive adequate religious training, they are still subjected to subtle gender discrimination as there are traces of prejudice against women within the local communities and even within the monastic community. 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 androcentric impulses whose roots lie in the dichotomy of purity-impurity still dictate Bhutanese society—a result of a fundamentally dualistic mind which the Buddhist teachings seek to eradicate. 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 Bhutanese society, especially the Buddhist clergy; achieving gender parity in religious practice would be a distant goal. It is only when Dratshang Lhentshog emulates efforts by clergy like Gyeltshen Trulku and Gangteng Trulku who have taken 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 patriarchal barriers begin to collapse. This will give Bhutanese women the equal opportunities they have always aspired for (and rightfully deserve) in religious practice. The Jashar nuns have begun to break these barriers.

Endnotes

¹ Sonam Wangmo is a Phd candidate at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya and Juli Edo is the Head of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya.

² Religious teacher

³ According to Wangmo (2013), there are currently twenty-one nunneries in Bhutan, with an estimated population of slightly over one thousand nuns.

⁴ The fieldwork in Jachung Karmo Nunnery was from mid-August to mid October 2012 and Jashar Goenpa from late October to late December 2012.

⁵ In addition, I am a Bhutanese 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.

⁶ (Tib: *ban de 'gro sa sgar red/byis mo 'gro sa gnas red*)

⁷ Ritual cakes

⁸ A sceptre; used as a ritual object to symbolise both the properties of a diamond (indestructibility) and a thunderbolt (irresistible force)

⁹ Not her real name. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the respondents

¹⁰ The Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings) and the Sangha (the community of monks and nuns)

¹¹ *lobdra*, (schools for entry-level monks), *shedra* (monastic college/institute) and *drubdra* (meditational centres, specifically focusing on retreats).

¹²The 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.

¹³ Lay practitioners who have expertise in Vajrayana Buddhist rites and rituals

¹⁴ Founder of Jashar Goenpa

¹⁵ Re-incarnate *lama*

¹⁶ Gangteng Tulku Rinpoche, ninth body incarnation of the Pema Lingpa lineage and a very highly revered *lama* in Bhutan

¹⁷ Education and Empowerment for the Women of Bhutan. Pema Choling Institute. By Christine Arpita

¹⁸ Monastic Body of Bhutan

¹⁹ Practicing in charnel grounds is not for the faint-hearted. Moreover, such practices are reserved for advanced *yogis* and *yoginis*.

²⁰ The *Six Yogas of Naropa*

²¹ cited in (Falk 2010: 224)

²² Comprising the full range of the following subjects: Alphabet (Dzongkha: *Ka Ku*), Spelling (Dzongkha: *zorlog*), Reading (Dzongkha: *tshigdu*), Memorization (Dzongkha: *chorjang*) of the prayer text and ritual, Grammar (Dzongkha: *sumtag*), Prosody (Dzongkha: *nyen-ngag*) and Literary Science (Dzongkha: *rigney*)

²³ Such as the founder, Lama Ngawang Pekar; his sister, the first abbess and then later, Anim Lopenma Paldon

²⁴ Spiritual head of Bhutan, with equal status as the king of Bhutan

²⁵ Buddhism

²⁶ which now has a nuns' college

²⁷ Emphasis on Buddhist philosophical studies

²⁸ Emphasis on meditation practice, i.e. experiential Buddhism

²⁹ Five major sciences (five major fields of study) viz. arts and crafts, medicine, grammar, logic and philosophy

³⁰ Five minor sciences (five minor fields of study) viz. poetry, synonyms, lexicography, astroscience and dance and drama

References

- Bhutan Nuns Foundation. (2011). Investing in the Nuns to be the “Agents of Social Change” in Bhutan . Thimphu: Bhutan Nuns Foundation.
- Campbell, J. (1996). Traveller in Space: In Search of Female Identity in Tibetan Buddhism. . New York: George Braziller.
- Denman, B. D., & Namgyel, S. (2008). Convergence of monastic and modern education in bhutan? *International review of education* (2008)(54), 475–491.
- Falk, M. L. (2010). Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand. Nias Press.
- Gross, R. M. (1993). *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Gutschow, K. (2004). *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Karmay, S. G. (2000). Dorje Lingpa and His Rediscovery of the “Gold Needle” in Bhutan. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 2, pp. 1-35.
- Makley, C. E. (2007). *The Violence of Liberation: Gender and Tibetan Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China*. University of California Press. Berkeley.2007. Berkeley: University of California Press. Berkeley.
- Malkin, J. (2009). A Profile of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo. Full Bloom-Final issue of Ascent Magazine.
- Penjore, D. (2005). Oral Construction of Exile Life and Times of Künkhyen Longchen Rabjam in Bumthang. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 13, pp. 60-73.
- Penjore, D. (2007). Role of Bhutanese Folktales in Value Transmission in Rethinking Development. Thimphu: Journal of Bhutan Studies.
- Phuntsho, K. (2005). On the Two Ways of Learning in Bhutan. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*.
- Schaeffer, K. R. (2004). *Himalayan Hermitess: The Life of a Tibetan Buddhist Nun*. Madison Avenue, New York.: Oxford University Press.
- Simmer-Brown, J. (2002). *Dakini's warm breath: the feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism*. Boston & London: Shambala.
- Sujato, B. (2009). *Bhikkhuni Vinaya Studies. Research And Reflections On Monastic Discipline For Buddhist Nuns*. Australia: Santipada Publications.
- Tsomo, K. L. (2009). Awakenings: Educating Himalayan Buddhist Nuns. 450-464.
- Wangmo, T. (2013). *Nunneries of Bhutan (A Brief Guide)*. (G. S. Gyeltshen, Trans.) Phuentsholing: Kuensel Corporation Limited.
- Zangmo, T. (2009). *Women's Contribution to Gross National Happiness: A Critical Analysis of the Role of Nuns and Nunneries in Education and Sustainable Development in Bhutan*. USA: Doctorate Dessertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst.