

Everyday Life  
in  
South  
Asia



EDITED BY

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Sarah Lamb*

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## The Delusion of Gender and Renunciation in Buddhist Kashmir

Kim Gutschow

In the enlightened mind, there is no male or female.  
 In the Buddha's speech, there is no near or far.

*Byang chub sems la pho mo med;*  
*rgyal ba' bka' la nye ring med.*

This Buddhist proverb from Kashmir illustrates the ideal doctrinal view that gender is supposed to be an illusion and not an obstacle on the path to enlightenment. In practice, however, gender appears to be a considerable obstacle on the monastic path. The manner in which the Buddha first founded the nuns' and monks' orders enshrined the dialectic of power between those orders. By making nuns subordinate to monks, the Buddha enabled the latter to amass considerable social, symbolic, and economic capital at the expense of nuns, their female counterparts in the Buddhist order. Despite recent challenges from feminists and international Buddhist reformers, nuns in Buddhist Kashmir have faced a glass ceiling in terms of ritual knowledges and practices. As a result, nuns were assumed to count less than monks and were also "left out of the count" in literature on Buddhism in Kashmir.

My method of emphasizing nuns over monks, as well as practice over doctrine, diverges from earlier scholarly approaches to Tibetan Buddhism. It pursues a heuristic laid out by Michelle Rosaldo (1980) and Sherry Ortner (1996), who have argued that one should not study women in isolation from men, nor should one isolate gender from other axes of social asymmetry.<sup>1</sup> While previous studies of Buddhist nuns (Barnes 1987, 1994; Tsomo 1988, 1996) have attempted to reconstruct the history of nuns, they have overlooked the dynamics of power between monks and nuns by which nuns have come to be second-class citizens in the monastic realm. Lopez (ed. 1995, 1998) has shown how Buddhist studies has long privileged the text and doctrine over the informant and her practices, while offering an

essentialized and timeless Shangri-La image of Tibetan Buddhism. I follow Lopez's call to deconstruct the myths about Tibetan Buddhism, by looking at the tropes which have been used to describe Buddhist nuns in literature on Buddhism in Kashmir.<sup>2</sup>

Until recently, much of the scholarship on Buddhism in Kashmir either ignored or misrecognized nuns due to a narrow doctrinal image of what a nun should look like. The absence of nuns in much of the literature on Buddhist monasticism in Kashmir is especially disconcerting given that nuns make up nearly two fifths of the resident monastic population in the Kashmiri subdistrict of Zangskar.<sup>3</sup> This ratio, which may be one of the highest in the entire Himalayan realm, is twice as high as the ratio of nuns to monks in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands before 1959 and eight times as high as the ratio in Tibetan refugee monasteries by the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Zangskar, which comprises the southern and safer half of Kargil district—the site of the most recent military clashes between India and Pakistan in the summer of 1999—has been Buddhist since at least the tenth century, although it is also home to a minority of Sunni Muslims. Although it covers an area roughly twice the size of Rhode Island, Zangskar's meager population of 12,000 makes it one of least populated regions in India.<sup>5</sup> The inhabitants, who live in over a hundred hamlets and villages at elevations between 3,000 and 4,200 meters, sustain a resident monastic population that makes up nearly 4 percent of the total population.

Although most of the monastic population of Zangskar lives in its seven monasteries and nine nunneries, nuns have more unorthodox residential arrangements. While most ordained nuns reside at a nunnery in monastic cells, some nuns live temporarily in the village caring for their aged parents. Regardless of where they reside, all nuns must work daily in the village in exchange for their daily bread. Some nunneries also house elderly women who are not ordained but take on five precepts—not to kill, steal, lie, commit sexual misconduct, or take intoxicants. This state of affairs was so confusing for many scholars that they often lumped ordained novices together with such elderly precept holders who had never been ordained and had no religious function in village life. While both these women are called "nuns" (*jo mo*) in the local vernacular, lay precept holders are also known as "village nuns" (*grong pa'i jo mo*) and never as ordained novices (*dge tshul ma*).<sup>6</sup> While the association between ordained nuns and elderly spinsters has contributed to a degraded image of Tibetan Buddhist nuns, past scholars failed to ask several critical questions: Why do ordained nuns work on village farms? Why don't they have the same institutional support that monks do? Why have nunneries become retreat centers for merit-making, while monasteries have served as centers for art, education, politics, business, and philosophy? To answer these questions, let us consider how nuns came to be second-class citizens within the Buddhist monastic order.

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## THE LAW OF THE BUDDHA

According to canonical texts, the Buddha allegedly accepted women into his monastic order on one condition: that they adopt the so-called Eight Chief Rules (*Garudhamma*). These rules specified that nuns may neither censure nor admonish monks and that nuns must take their ordinations, bimonthly confessions, rainy season retreats, and penances in the presence of monks. The Buddha's aunt objected to only one of the eight rules—the one specifying that even a senior nun who has been ordained one hundred years must bow down to a youthful novice who has been ordained but a day—but her objection was overruled by the Buddha himself. While scholars have suggested that these baneful rules may never have been spoken by the Buddha, their lasting legacy is undeniable (Falk 1980; Gross 1993; Horner 1930; Paul 1985; Sponberg 1992; Willis 1985). The cumulative effect of the Eight Chief Rules was to give monks the pastoral rights to discipline and punish nuns. Monks came to regulate the traffic in nuns, by controlling women's admission to and exclusion from the nuns' order at all stages of the process. In Kashmir today, monks still officiate most rites of passage which nuns must undergo, including first tonsure, novice ordination, entrance into the monastic assembly, absolution, penances, expulsion, and final cremation (Gutschow 1998, 2000).

When the Buddha subordinated nuns to monks, the nunneries were never able to gain the same power and wealth that monasteries could and eventually the nuns' order died out in many parts of South and Southeast Asia. As popular and devotional forms of Hinduism grew in the first millennium, the newly formed Buddhist orders had to compete for a shrinking base of donors. During this period, Buddhist nuns could not command the same educational and ritual prestige that monks could. Due to decreasing patronage, lineages of fully ordained nuns died out one by one across the subcontinent, as region after region lost the ability to form the requisite quorum of ten nuns to ordain the next generation of nuns. The monks' order also suffered and was nearly wiped out in medieval Sri Lanka and Tibet for instance. Yet by importing monks from elsewhere, often at great expense, the royal patrons in these places managed to perpetuate the lineage of fully ordained monks even in times of considerable social and political turmoil.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, little effort was made to revive the nuns' order when and where it collapsed.

By the twelfth century, women could no longer seek full ordination in much of South and Southeast Asia. While Tibetan Buddhist orders allowed women to ordain as novices, they never supported a lineage of fully ordained nuns. In Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, women have the option of holding between eight and ten precepts as de facto

rather than *de jure* nuns.<sup>8</sup> By 1988, of the 60,000 women worldwide who held some form of Buddhist precepts or monastic vows, only one-fourth were fully ordained nuns, who lived mostly in China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, and the West.<sup>9</sup> The recent efforts to reinstate a full ordination lineage in the Tibetan tradition and in Sri Lanka with the assistance of East Asian nuns from Taiwan or Korea has not had much impact in Kashmir.<sup>10</sup> Although the Dalai Lama has given his support, many monastics and some feminists remain opposed, albeit for different reasons. Senior monks argue that formal teaching structures are not yet in place, while feminists hold that female renunciants are better off outside this disciplinary gaze of monks.

In Buddhist Kashmir, the lack of full ordination left novice nuns at the mercy of fully ordained monks who amassed enormous amounts of symbolic and economic capital. Monks became virtuoso ritualists, philosophers, and bureaucrats, while nunneries devolved into impoverished and politically irrelevant retreat centers.<sup>11</sup> While renowned religious women like Machig Labdron, Yeshe Tsogyal, and Nangsa Obum taught unconventional Tantric teachings outside the monastic framework, nuns rarely had the chance to transmit esoteric teachings to their own disciples. Each generation of nuns had to go to the monks for further teachings and advanced ritual training. The exclusion of women from philosophical dialectics and esoteric ritual practices was maintained in each of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Gelug, Kagyud, Sakya, and Nyingma). Until recently, nuns were ineligible to attend the highest monastic and ritual colleges of the Dalai Lama's own Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. Western feminists have asked the Dalai Lama to accept nuns at his exclusive philosophical academy in Dharmasala, the Namgyal Institute of Dialectics. Other initiatives have led the avant-garde nunneries in Kathmandu, Kyirong and Kopan to teach nuns sacred arts like the construction of sand mandalas (*dkyil 'khor*), burnt offerings (*sbyin sreg*), and meditative dances (*chams*).<sup>12</sup> Significantly, these are the ritual practices which have earned Tibetan monks fame and cash in their travels abroad.

While the Buddha clearly disavowed the role of the priest in purifying others, Buddhist monks in Zangskar have monopolized many ritual practices, including the expiatory and purificatory rites which are so essential to the maintenance of village and household space. In Zangskar as elsewhere in India, the female body exemplifies an innate impurity which the male does not.<sup>13</sup> Due to menstruation and childbirth, women's bodies are conceptualized as inherently impure and thus offensive to the deities of place and space which guarantee household, village, and monastic prosperity. Even though nuns are never mothers and, if elderly, have ceased to menstruate, they remain excluded from many places and rituals of power where Tantric deities, local guardian deities, or underworld spirits are worshipped. Monks have preserved the sole authority to officiate the expiatory

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and propitiatory rites (*gtor rgyab*, *brgya bzhi*, *mdos*, *glud*), ritual ablutions (*khrus*), and agrarian circumambulations (*'bum khor*) which cleanse monastic, village, and household spaces from ritual pollution. At routine life-cycle events to which both assemblies of nuns and monks are invited, such as funerals and weddings, the ritual roles for nuns and monks are carefully segregated. Only monks may officiate the cremation rite (*sbying sregs*) and the transfer of the corpse's consciousness (*cho ga*), and only monks conduct the ritual transference (*g.yang 'gugs, zor*) of the bride from her natal to her husband's household and clan deity. Despite their textual and ritual literacy, nuns are called to perform basic household rites only as substitutes when monks are unavailable.

#### THE ECONOMY OF MERIT IN KASHMIR

Because the monks' order is still considered to be a higher "field of merit" than the nuns' order in Kashmir today, villagers channel their donations and alms to the monastery. Historically, giving to monasteries offered donors both political prestige and private merit. The historical record for Zangskar and Tibet offers many examples of kings and nobles who gave land grants to charismatic monks during times of political or social crisis in order to demonstrate their piety.<sup>14</sup> By the time of the Permanent Settlement in 1908, local monasteries held one-tenth of all cultivated land in Zangskar. By 1994, Zangskar's largest monastery still owned 90 times the average private holding of 2.8 acres per household.<sup>15</sup> Even today, one out of four households in Zangskar still sharecrop one or more fields from a monastery and some sharecroppers own no land whatsoever. Monasteries command enormous rents, as well as customary donations of corvee labor, grain, butter, firewood, dung, and other services. In contrast to the monasteries, most nunneries collect neither rents nor other tithes. At present, five of nine nunneries in Zangskar have no fields at all, and the other four own a handful of fields from which they harvest a pittance. The monastery in Karsha annually earns one hundred times as much grain as the nunnery, although there are only four times as many monks as nuns.<sup>16</sup> Because nunneries have so little endowment, they cannot afford to feed their members on a daily basis. Karsha nunnery's rites are sponsored on a rotational basis by nun stewards who solicit donations of butter, flour, and other staples.

Institutional poverty forces Zangskari nuns to toil selflessly on their parents' farms in exchange for their daily bread. Even as their shorn heads and sexless maroon robes signal a lofty intent to renounce the worldly life, nuns are pulled back into productive roles by households unwilling to lose an able-bodied servant. According to a common Tibetan proverb, "If you want to serve, make your son a monk, if you want a servant, make your

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daughter a nun." The dutiful daughters and sisters who toil on their father's or brother's estate years after taking monastic vows ensures the agrarian prosperity of lay households as well as monasteries. Classical Buddhist injunctions against nuns performing chores for monks are overlooked by monks who recruit nuns to wash, sew, and cook for their private benefit. Moreover, the monastic community has no compunction about recruiting nuns to perform the most menial and labor-intensive tasks on the monastic estates, like weeding the monastery's fields, tending huge flocks of monastic cattle and yaks at the high pastures for half the year, washing, drying, and roasting thousands of kilos of grain which the monastery collects from its sharecroppers, and baking thousands of loaves of bread for two annual festivals—around winter solstice and before spring plowing. In theory, compassion is supposed to be applied universally; in practice, it is exacted along lines dictated by custom and kinship.

While renunciation is a full-time occupation for monks, it is an unpaid but meritorious vocation for nuns. Sending a daughter to the nunnery is like placing her in a state school without a scholarship. She may have access to peers, knowledge, and travel which take her far beyond the provincial village life, but she must pay her own way. On the other hand, sending a son to the monastery is like enrolling him in an Ivy League or Oxbridge college with a full fellowship. Not only is he guaranteed a handsome stipend for his studies, but his elite education and status will provide him with ample opportunities for privilege and private profit for the rest of his life. The senior monks and reincarnate<sup>17</sup> priests graduate into more obscure offices for which the duties are less and less understood but the remuneration in cash and kind ever more handsome. In recent decades, increasing opportunities for employment in the civil and military sectors of the state economy have left monasteries struggling to attract young members. Monasteries are rapidly losing monks to the pull of the secular and consumer world, while some nunneries are gaining members and others are being founded in villages where there have not been nuns for centuries. How can this be?

#### WHO BECOMES A NUN IN ZANGSKAR?

Given the patriarchal nature of Buddhist monasticism, why would an able-bodied woman in the flower of her youth still wish to join the nunnery? Why do young women continue to pursue the Buddha's discipline of detachment in a region where the economy of merit is giving way to an economy of consumption? Let us look at the narratives told by a few nuns at the largest nunnery in Zangskar, Karsha.

Tsering was raised by her mother, who had never been married to Tsering's father. Although customary law gives the father custody of his child

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after she is weaned, Tsering's mother simply refused when her father came to collect her at age four. She pointed out to her former lover that while he had a wife and children, she was single and would need Tsering's help on her fields. Tsering and her mother lived together until she was sixteen, when she got the shock of her life. One day, she came upon her father telling her mother that a neighbor had sent the "asking beer" (*dri chang*), the first of many negotiations necessary to arrange Tsering's marriage. Tsering spun on her heels and took to the hills behind the house, climbing up and up the cliff until she was dizzy, only stopping when the village and her house were no more than a speck far below. While her father and mother called her all afternoon, she remained hidden in the safety of the red rocks. She sat and thought about how to avoid the indignities under which her mother had chafed. Her mother's first liaison, with Tsering's father, had been disastrous. As the youngest and most spoiled of five sisters, her mother had inherited a parcel of land and some livestock from Tsering's grandfather. With the security that property brings in a land where most women are disenfranchised by virtue of their sex, her proud mother was unwilling to submit to Tsering's father's illicit affairs. Her mother's next affair was with an abusive drunk. As Tsering sat and recounted these relationships, she decided she would never marry. She waited until night fell, when she heard the jingle of her father saddling his horse and the familiar clop of the hooves fading in the distance. As she came down, her mother teased her about getting married but agreed to let her become a nun, as she asked. She realized how helpful it would be to have a daughter close by for daily chores.

Palmo told me about the misfortunes that brought her to the nunnery. Because Palmo's mother was only a mistress and never a wife, she was forced by custom to relinquish her rights to raise her daughter. Her mother's role as clandestine mistress of several brothers in the same household gave her little respect and no authority over the children she bore. Palmo's paternity was decided by lottery among the three brothers who had shared Palmo's mother's bed. Following customary law, Palmo was taken away from her mother to be raised by her father, who would have the rights to her labor until she was married. Palmo's father came to take his daughter away from her mother when he moved to a distant village, where he married his brother's widow. Palmo was an outsider twice over in her new stepmother's house. Her father was a powerless second husband who would never fill his deceased brother's shoes while Palmo was a sign of his past infidelities. Palmo was only fed the leftover scraps after others had eaten and clothes which her stepsister had neglected. Palmo lost count of how many times she ran away to her mother's village, before her father came to beat her and take her back home. Palmo vowed never to wind up a spurned mistress like her mother, and asked her father's permission to join the nunnery. When her father and stepmother stalled in hopes of keep-

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ing Palmo at home to do chores, she threatened to kill herself. After years of private study and a steady resolve to join the nunnery, Palmo convinced her father to take her to the nunnery, although he has barely supported her since that day.

Chosnyid had to struggle to renounce for she was an eldest daughter who flagrantly disobeyed both her parents and society. Shortly before she and her best friend were to be married, they went to hear the Kalachakra teachings given by a famous monk. They were so moved, they offered their hair and jewels to the monk, begging him to shave their heads and allow them to take up five precepts. When her parents heard that their daughter had shaved her head and given away her jewelry, they were livid with rage. Her father came to fetch her at the nunnery, telling her that he'd been negotiating her wedding for five years, with considerable expense. Thrashing her soundly, he tied her onto the horse in front of him like a child and took her home. When his daughter outwitted him and fled back to the nunnery, her father came to fetch her once again. For a year, Chosnyid and her father were engaged in this tedious game of hide-and-seek until she could bear it no longer. When the snows melted, she fled over the passes to Dharmasala, where she became a nun and settled near the Dalai Lama's personal monastery. She has never returned to Zangskar, although twenty-five years have passed.

#### THE STRUGGLES AND MOTIVATIONS FOR RENUNCIATION

What do these stories tell us about the struggle for renunciation in Zangskar? A propensity for religious study or devotion, the words of a charismatic teacher, and childhood hardship or abuse all influence the choice to renounce lay life. Yet one cannot leap to facile generalizations. While domestic abuse, jealous stepmothers, and illegitimacy crop up in the lives of many Zangskari women, only a few will reach the nunnery gates. There is no single factor that determines who becomes a nun, yet a few patterns emerge. Over half the nuns at Karsha come from homes where there is only one parent due to parental death, divorce, or illegitimacy. Nearly two-thirds of the Karsha nuns were sent to live with relatives as au pair girls during their childhood. During this period away from home, many of them may have learned the self-abnegation and stoicism essential to the celibate life. Oldest daughters from unbroken homes, who would ordinarily be destined for marriage, almost never become nuns.<sup>18</sup> While there is no bar against wealthy or aristocratic daughters joining the nunnery, most nuns come from households at the middle-to-lower end of the income spectrum.

Caste, rather than class, presents one of the more salient obstacles to the religious life in Zangskar. Women who belong to the lowest strata (*rigs*

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ngan), which is made up of three named clans, Gara, Beda, and Mon, are ineligible to join the nunnery, without exception. Although Zangskar does not have a caste system of hierarchically ranked *jati*, the members of these three clans are treated like outcasts and denied intermarriage and commensality with the rest of the population. They cannot join a monastic assembly because, as one nun put it quite pithily, "If the blacksmith becomes chantmaster and must sit at the head of the seating row, where shall we sit?" In other words, she could not imagine a reversal of the traditional seating hierarchy (*gral*), in which the members of these lower strata must always sit at the end of the row, nearest the door.

While the women in these stories share a determined desire to escape the inevitable hardship of their lot, joining the nunnery does not happen overnight. Even those young women who flee to the nunnery somewhat abruptly must dedicate themselves to a lengthy period of tutelage. While many young women dream of becoming nuns or later regret that they didn't, the educated elite who actually become nuns must persevere through a lengthy apprenticeship and training period. Because in these changing times when Urdu and English literacy are critical to desirable government jobs or military service, young girls are taught Tibetan even more rarely than young boys. Those who make it into the ranks of the nunnery or the monastery are few and far between. Young women who become nuns must show extraordinary aptitude in order to grasp the archaic syntax of classical Tibetan while memorizing abstruse philosophical texts of which little is understood or explicated. Women do not arrive at the nunnery gate "by accident" as much as by sustained efforts. Those women who join a monastic assembly are not unwanted spinsters, widows, and divorcees with no other options in life but to get themselves to a nunnery. None lack the endurance necessary to stick to the straight and narrow path while avoiding the seductive lure of mundane desires and affairs in which they must learn to play no part.

Everything by your own will is blessed happiness,  
Everything by another's will is suffering . . .

(*Rang dbang thams cad dge ba yin*  
*Gzhan dbang thams cad sdug bsngal yin*)

Several nuns recited this popular Zangskari proverb when asked to explain why they became nuns. What they meant was that the freedom to make merit rather than babies or more housework was one of the most important reasons for joining the nunnery. The two most common reasons given for joining the nunnery were (1) to earn merit to avoid a female rebirth the next time around and (2) to avoid the suffering of marriage and maternity. Merit is seen as the vehicle that takes one out of suffering and

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transports one into a better rebirth. In fact, many nuns explain that they are at the nunnery not so much out of choice but because of their destiny or karma. In other words, the merit they have accumulated in their previous lifetimes is far more important than any choices they may have made or failed to make. Yet seeing one's position as a karmic boon does not deny agency or prevent nuns from surmounting considerable obstacles, as the stories above suggest. Adversity forges determination as much as endurance for those who are truly dedicated to the renunciant lifestyle.

Many nuns told me quite explicitly that they became nuns to avoid the pain of abusive marriages, miscarriages, and infant deaths that they have seen their sisters and girlfriends experience. These fears are not exaggerated in a region where one in three children die under the age of five. The local prevalence of alcoholism, domestic abuse, and rape results in unhappy marriages and a fairly high rate of divorce, while fears of rape are a constraint on women's freedoms and vocational opportunities.<sup>19</sup> The nunnery still serves as a haven for those women who aspired to freedom from domestic drudgery despite the recent increases in educational and vocational opportunities. While a small percentage of students actually complete ten years of education at shoddy government schools in Zangskar, nearly 99 percent fail the secondary leaving exam and are thus ineligible to obtain most higher government posts. In recent decades, some of the rare women who have passed the exam have become nurses, teachers, and medical orderlies. Yet many still lack the wealth and prestige to secure a job in the lucrative government sector, for which there are always far more applicants than positions. Yet women may still choose the nunnery over a secular career, which does not free a woman from her husband's or brother's authority. Nuns, in contrast, gain a "room of their own" at the nunnery, which leaves them relatively free to pursue meditations, studies, and merit.

Why would parents want to send a daughter to the nunnery? Yalman (1962) has argued that poor families in Sri Lanka benefit by sending their children to the monastery. This rational choice framework does not apply in Zangskar for several reasons. Firstly, Zangskari families who give up their daughters to a nunnery still have a mouth to feed, because of the institutional poverty of nunneries. Secondly, a more important motivation from the parents' perspective is gaining an adult worker who will help on the family estate. Unlike elsewhere in South Asia, Zangskari households face shortages of labor rather than food. The recent migration of young men out of Zangskar for education or jobs in the military and civil sectors have reduced the pool of available adult labor and made it even more desirable to have a daughter become a nun and servant. Poor households who cannot afford the costly ritual sponsorship required of nuns who join the monastic assembly may choose to keep their daughters at home as spin-

sters rather than letting them become nuns. Lastly, prospective nuns face significant emotional and psychological obstacles, not the least of which may include their families. One cannot treat monasticism as a solution to the problem of rural poverty. If poverty was the main reason that children joined the nunnery or monastery, these institutions would be overflowing with members. The spiritual gains of monasticism are tempered by the obstacles and difficulties of maintaining lifelong vows. Sometimes these include the families themselves. While some parents welcome the prospect of a daughter at the nunnery because they gain both merit and a lifelong servant, others are hesitant to commit their children to such a path. The risk of being forced to leave the monastic life for breaking one of the root vows hinders many prospective applicants from even joining.

#### MODERNITY AND MONASTICISM IN KASHMIR

In recent years, local and foreign feminists have made attempts to revolutionize the education of nuns in the Kashmiri regions of Zangskar and Ladakh. The Ladakhi Nuns Association has been founded by a charismatic local nun, Ani Palmo, to benefit some two dozen nunneries in eastern Kashmir, while harnessing the more recent flood of foreign sponsorship. Kashmir's Buddhist nunneries came onto the map of global feminism after the Fourth International Conference on Women and Buddhism was held in Leh, Ladakh, to promote Buddhist women's education, ordination, and religious training (Gutschow 1995). The entwined flows of capitalism and feminism have resulted in a flurry of expansion and building at over a dozen Ladakhi nunneries, several of which were founded in the last decade. Many of these nunneries face severe shortages of housing, land, and educational resources. In an effort to educate nuns about the value of the monastic discipline, Ani Palmo organized a series of innovative monastic conferences in the late 1990s. Learned Ladakhi monks holding doctorates of theology explained the meaning and importance of the novice precepts to nuns, using explanatory texts such as *The Essential Ocean of Vinaya*. The instructors explained that every monastic bears a karmic burden, not only for him- or herself, but as an example for laypeople. Ani Palmo concluded the conference with a memorable speech about how a nun's virtue is like a white cloth: once stained, it can never be clean or pure again. It is far too early to tell if these efforts will lift the glass ceiling on the nuns' vocation or simply reinforce yet again the subordination of undereducated nuns to monks.

Whether the Buddha intended it or not, the monastic order was adapted to prevailing social hierarchies from the moment of its inception. Impoverished and undereducated communities of nuns have had little opportu-

nity to learn the ritual practices and knowledges controlled by monks. While Buddhist doctrine has attempted to transcend gender by arguing that it has no bearing on the potential for enlightenment, Buddhist practice maintains disparity at every turn. When parents send their daughters to the nunnery in exchange for merit, they also earn a share of her labor henceforth. Although Buddhism is often portrayed as having a politically correct ideology on many issues, including the environment, its stance on gender has been not as enlightened as it could have been.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Tibetan terms are written following the standard Wylie system of transliteration although Kashmiri spellings may vary from Lhasa Tibetan. I thank the nuns, monks, and individual families who have hosted me in Zangskar for their boundless patience, compassion, and generosity. The Jacob Javits Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, and the Harvard Department of Anthropology funded my research between 1991 and 1997. Thanks to Michael Aris, Hanna Havnevik, Arthur Kleinman, Sarah Lamb, Sarah Levine, Diane Mines, Jan Willis, and Nur Yalman for helpful comments and conversations.

#### NOTES

1. Ortner (1996) follows Rosaldo (1980) in arguing that the issue of male dominance is less interesting than the study of how that dominance is framed differently according to the relations between the sexes and the interrelationship of other asymmetrical relations in any given society.

2. Lopez's (1998: 211) critical deconstruction of Tibetan Buddhism repeats the common tropes about nuns when it notes, "Unmarried daughters often became nuns (sometimes remaining at home). Other women became nuns to escape a bad marriage, to avoid pregnancy, or after the death of a spouse." Such images do not represent the current reality in Kashmir, where not one of the 115 resident nuns I have interviewed in the last decade was a divorcee and only one was a widow.

3. Scholars who have described Zangskar's seven monasteries while ignoring its nine nunneries include Crook and Osmaston (1994), Dendaletche (1985), Dargyay and Dargyay (1980), Dargyay (1987, 1988), Petech (1977, 1998), Schuh (1976, 1983), and Snellgrove and Skorupski (1980).

4. Shakabpa (1967) reports the ratio of one nun for every nine monks in Tibet before 1959. Havnevik (1992: 85) reports 653 nuns and 6,337 monks in India, Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan before 1959; and 340 nuns and 6,278 monks in Tibetan refugee monasteries by the late 1980s. Gutschow (1998: 97) reports that Zangskar's nine nunneries housed 116 nuns while its seven monasteries housed 297 monks in 1997.

5. Aridity and altitude allow for the cultivation of three subsistence crops—barley, wheat, and peas—as well as extensive flocks of sheep, goats, cows, yaks, and crossbreeds (*mdzo*). Most villages have between 50 and 500 inhabitants, who

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are bound by a patrilineal kinship system, which permits a medley of patrilocal and matrilocal polyandry, polygamy, monogamy, and monastic celibacy.

6. Scholars who describe the pathetic status of "village nuns" in Kashmir but largely ignore monastic nuns include Crook and Osmaston (1994) and Dollfus (1989). Compare Klein's (1985) description of unordained and unmarried women in eastern Tibet known as *ka ma*, who dressed like Buddhist nuns and could join the circle of monks' tents in order to concentrate on religious practices. Ortner (1989, 1996: 119) also describes unordained women (*khor ba*) or "peripheral ones," who are affiliated with Sherpa nunneries in Nepal.

7. Falk (1980) and Barnes (1994) describe the devolution of the nuns' order in India. Gombrich (1971, 1988) notes that each time the monks' order was in danger of collapse in Sri Lanka—in 1065, 1596, 1697, and 1753—a quorum of either Burmese or Thai monks came to revive the monks' ordination lineages.

8. Tsering and Russell (1996) indicate that between the twelfth and the sixteenth century, several Tibetan women may have been ordained as nuns by monks alone, without the benefit of quorum of fully ordained nuns.

9. Tsomo (1988) notes that 60,000 women hold Buddhist precepts throughout the world: 15,000 are fully ordained nuns, 5,000 are novices or probationers, and 40,000 hold a varying number of precepts (five, eight, or ten).

10. The debate about reestablishing the nuns' full ordination tradition is discussed in Bartholomeusz (1992), Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), Li (2000), and Tsomo (1988, 1996).

11. Although Buddhist discipline actually forbids monastics from handling money, most Zangskari monastics accept payment for their ritual services and some serve the monastic treasury which loans cash to local villagers in addition to managing other endowments. Gutschow (1997, 1998) describes the historical origins of the economy of merit which enfolds the monastery, nunnery, and village households in Zangskari society.

12. Kerin (2000) describes the Kyirong Thukche Choling nunnery in Nepal, which has begun to teach sacred arts with the support of the Dalai Lama.

13. Gutschow (1998) summarizes the exclusion of women from sacred space in Zangskar, while Ortner (1973) and Daniels (1994) describe the role of women in the purity and pollution dynamic of Tibetan culture.

14. In the sixteenth century, for instance, an abbot paid the ransom fee for the king of Zangskar during a war with the Kashgar chieftain, Mirza Haidar. In return, his monastery was rewarded handsomely with huge estates throughout western Zangskar and in the neighboring kingdom of Ladakh.

15. Gutschow (1998) and Riaboff (1997) have discussed the statistics on land ownership in Zangskar.

16. If the membership were proportional with its sharecropping income, the monastery should have 2,000 monks. Karsha nuns receive 8 kilograms of grain every three years, while Karsha monks receive roughly 60 kilograms of grain per year. Compare the nunnery in Nepal which provided each of its twenty-three members with 84 kilograms of grain per year, as Fürer-Haimendorf (1976) and Aziz (1976) noted.

17. A reincarnate priest or monk is one for whom a rebirth is actively sought out and identified after his death. Although there are thousands of recognized reincarnate monks in Tibetan society, the most famous example is the lineage of Dalai Lamas, who served as spiritual and political leaders of Tibet from the mid-seventeenth century until 1959.

18. Out of over one hundred nuns I interviewed in Zangskar, not a single one

was an oldest daughter. Chosnyid, who was an exception to this rule, had to flee Zangskar in order to evade the marriage her parents had arranged and desperately sought to consummate.

19. In one Zangskari village of over four hundred persons, there was one rape per year between 1993 and 1997, which is was more than thirty times the all-India rate between 1985 and 1995 according to one estimate (Chaturvedi 1995). Zangskar's estimated infant mortality rate of 250 per thousand was over three times the all-India rate (75 per 1,000) for 1996.