

# BEING A BUDDHIST NUN

The Struggle for Enlightenment  
in the Himalayas



Kim Gutschow

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*To the nuns of Zangskar, who  
protect the unprotected,  
aid the suffering, and  
are an inexhaustible treasure for all sentient beings*

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## Preface

My first trip to Zangskar was almost as grueling as the second. In late September of 1989, I'd been riding high atop bags of cement, coughing frantically from the combined effects of altitude and cement dust. The fine cement dust billowed out at every bump as our truck slowly crawled along the deeply pockmarked and unpaved jeep track which served as Zangskar's primary travel artery when free of snow between June and November each year. My brother had already threatened mutiny earlier in the day, as we sat perched in the low wooden box above the driver's cabin, with little to shelter us from the freezing wind and stray branches in the predawn darkness. Just after he had told me, "I'm not a piece of meat, you know—I think it's time to get off this truck," the drivers had pulled in for a brief breakfast stop. They had generously invited us into a friend's home to share their breakfast of chapattis and refried vegetables. Yet when their truck had broken down shortly afterward, we had taken our packs to the road and flagged down the first truck going the full 450 kilometers into Zangskar. I couldn't help wondering if we'd abandoned the first truck somewhat too hastily as we sat in the back of the heavily loaded cement truck, which wheezed and gurgled up the snaking track to the top of the forbidding 14,500-foot Pentse La pass. Despite many stops to quench the engine's thirst and cool its overheated radiator, by evening we had arrived deep into the central Zangskar valley. After we were disgorged at a half-built hydroelectric project—which remains under construction today, fifteen years later—we walked the last 15 kilometers into Padum, Zangskar's central village.

My second trip into Zangskar, in May of 1991, was on foot, while the Pentse La pass lay under several meters of snow. Busy avoiding the cement

dust the first time around, I hadn't really noticed the meandering plateau at the top of the pass. This time around Phuntsog, my guide, and I were up to our thighs in snow with every second step. His unlucky horse, which was carrying my pack, trembled and panted with each step, as its scrawny legs plunged thigh deep into the snowy crust barely grazing its belly. Phuntsog had been right to want to stop at the unroofed stone shelter we'd passed earlier that day. I had wanted to push on, not realizing the distance that lay ahead before we would drop off the pass, because my backpacking instincts had warned me against sleeping on top of an unprotected pass. "What was I thinking, trying to lead rather than follow, in a landscape I don't know," I chastised myself, as Phuntsog signaled to an island of dry ground no more than ten meters long and half as wide, where we would spend the night. After tethering and unloading the horse, I was grateful that Phuntsog had had the foresight to bring a bottle of kerosene and some kindling. Amid the boulders and small islands where the snow had melted, I set off to scrounge for dung, which spluttered and smoldered in our damp fire. When I expressed surprise at finding dung here, amid the high peaks and a day's walk from a village in either direction, Phuntsog explained that we were camped near the high grazing pastures which would be filled with yaks, cattle, and *mdzo*—the sturdy crossbreed—in a month's time after the snows had melted. For now, the pass was desolate and the snow lay thick and gray as the temperatures dropped to freezing. After Phuntsog set the salt tea to boil, he unwrapped the scarf covering his thin religious text and began to read prayers that would become ever more familiar to me in the coming years. I took out my journal and began to think.

We had set out at 5 A.M. from Phuntsog's house in Tashitongdze, the last village before the pass. Although the political boundaries of Zangskar technically start atop the Pentse La pass, Tashitongdze and two other Buddhist hamlets encircling the monastery of Rangdum are informally considered part of Zangskar rather than part of the predominantly Shiite Suru Valley which lies between Rangdum and Kargil town farther to the north. I'd reached Kargil a few days earlier by bus, after traveling westward along India's border with Pakistan for some 250 kilometers from the town of Leh, which lies somewhat closer to the Tibetan border. A popular destination for backpackers and dharma bums, and a critical army base for the defense of India's contested northern borders, Leh is home to the only commercial airstrip in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, which forms the eastern half

of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. After flying to Leh from New Delhi only ten days earlier, I had arrived in Kargil, a frontier bazaar conveniently situated halfway along the single east-west highway that ran from Leh to Srinagar, the state capital. The cheap hotels and pleading tourist wallahs had changed little in the two years since I'd first come to Kargil on my way to Zangskar.

On that trip I'd arrived in Kargil with my brother during Muharram, a festival held to honor Ali, the most famous martyr and founder of the Shia sect of Islam. Like Kargil's women, we had stayed indoors, helpless spectators to the religious delirium into which the festival participants willingly plunged themselves. Gangs of young men paraded through the streets, flagellating themselves with iron braids and field scythes, bearing placards depicting Khomeini and shouting slogans castigating America. As I listened to the weeping and wailing that emanated from nearby balconies, I was both fascinated and repelled by the religiosity around me, so different from the Sunni Islam I'd once studied in Cairo.

This time I'd come to Kargil alone, long before the Pentse La pass was open to vehicles. The local tourist officer had politely suggested that I join a group of schoolteachers from Dras who were planning to walk into Zangskar. After I met up with the teachers and negotiated a berth in the taxi they had booked for the first leg of their trip, I went to purchase a few provisions for the journey—Maggi soups, tea, sugar, and dried milk. As I hastened to the taxi stand the next morning, I was relieved to see four Buddhist nuns from Zangskar, who helped alleviate my awkward exchanges with the young men, whose own sisters would never dare to travel alone, on foot, into the wilds of Zangskar. The classical Tibetan I'd studied in a Harvard classroom was not much help in parsing the drivers' Dardic dialect. Yet I could communicate with the nuns in both Tibetan and their own Ladakhi dialect, which I'd studied in the two previous years I'd visited Ladakh. Despite their flimsy sneakers and thin polyester monastic robes, the nuns sported army-issue bedrolls, backpacks, and glacier goggles which they'd been loaned by cousins serving in the military. Their backpacks were stuffed to the brim with gifts and clothes after their winter pilgrimage in India, where they had attended the Dalai Lama's teachings in Dharamsala and visited the Tibetan communities in South India. As they were unable to find a berth in any of the Tibetan nunneries, they were looking forward to rejoining their own tiny assembly of nuns in Zangla village.

After the taxi left us at the first major snowbank covering the road, we set off on foot. For the next few days, I could barely keep up with my companions as I struggled under my heavy pack. Stuffed with too few clothes, far too many notebooks, and the odd assortment of novels and essays, including both Thoreau's *Walden* and Emerson's essay on self-reliance, I was miserably unequipped to be running over 14,000-foot passes. I crashed through the delicate snowy crust again and again, while my companions nimbly skated across the frozen snowfields and darted from rock to rock across the streams and steep scree slopes. The nuns were solicitous during our tea breaks, chatting amiably as the designated tea brewer would whip out her pot, remove the small bundles of green tea, salt, butter, sugar, dried cheese, and *rtsam pa* or roasted barley flour. Providing just the right mix of salt, carbohydrates, and fat, the staples of the Tibetan diet—salty butter tea and barley flour—perfectly quenched both thirst and hunger during high-altitude exertions. Our first night was spent in a stone shelter, where I shared my Maggi soups with the nuns before we each slipped into our sleeping bags. By the time we reached Tashitongdze, at the base of the Pentse La pass, the nuns had decided to take a rest day until their blisters healed, while I foolishly decided to plunge ahead with Phuntsog, whose horse and services I'd hired for the remainder of the journey into Zangskar.

That is how I came to be stranded on top of the pass with little food, no tent, and a rapidly dwindling supply of dung. While Phuntsog had been reading his text, the sky had turned an ominous shade of gray. When he stopped to make dinner, a thin barley gruel, it began to snow. I absorbed my first lesson in the power of *mantra*. The flakes fell softly at first but gathered momentum as the dense, wet flakes fell thickly into the fire. I felt slightly guilty rolling out my Thermarest pad and down sleeping bag, while Phuntsog laid out the horse blankets and wrapped himself in a full-length sheepskin cloak. While I awoke, shivering, through the night to brush the snow off my wet bag, Phuntsog snored deeply in his blizzard-proof sheepskin. Long before dawn, we awoke from the cold and agreed that it was time to retreat. Packing up and loading the horse in short order, we set off back the way we had come to Phuntsog's house in Tashitongdze.

After a few days of rest and recuperation while the storm abated, we set off once more to walk over the pass. This time, we left Tashitongdze at 1 A.M., walking under the light of the full moon, to take the best advantage of the crust. At the top of the pass we spent a night in the stone shelter we'd

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passed up the last time, and the next day we marched easily over the pass and down into the upper reaches of Zangskar's northern valley, where we stayed with Phuntsog's relatives in Abran village. After making our way down the Zangskar valley for the next few days, we reached Padum, the administrative center, where I met up with my friends from Zangla nunnery. They were attending a religious teaching just outside of Padum at the Dalai Lama's summer palace. Monks and nuns had come from throughout Zangskar to attend the week-long teaching on the graduated stages of the path to enlightenment. When the nuns from Zangla begged me to come teach English at their nunnery, I promised to come visit after I'd explored the nearby nunnery in Karsha village, which also housed the region's largest and wealthiest monastery. I managed to secure an interview with several of the Karsha nuns and their teacher, the Minister or Lonpo of Karsha. As an aristocrat and a scholar, the Lonpo was also a teacher at the local high school who quickly grasped the scope of my research project.

After I explained that I hoped to study the interactions between nunnery, monastery, and village while living at the nunnery, the Lonpo asked about my personal motivations. I told him that I did not intend to become a nun, but was hoping to apprentice myself to the nuns in order to write a dissertation about life at a Zangskari nunnery. Although the Lonpo and the nuns had never heard of Harvard or even Boston, they understood my Ph.D. to be something akin to their Geshe degree, the highest degree attainable at the great monastic colleges within the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. The Lonpo explained that the nuns would confer as an assembly before coming to a decision—my first experience of the monastic democracy that was used to adjudicate any serious decision that the assembly might face—and indicated that our interview was over. A few days later I got a message from the Lonpo indicating that I was welcome to begin my residence at the nunnery, and I shouldered the pack to walk the easy 10 kilometers across the valley to Karsha.

When I reached the empty nunnery, it seemed forlorn; the entire assembly of nuns was in Padum. Yet this proved to be a blessing, as it gave me ample opportunity to scout out my solitary surroundings and begin to appreciate how little time the nuns actually spent in community rituals, given their busy lives. After the nuns returned a week later, I was introduced to the full assembly during the next monthly prayer meeting. I cooked for myself the first few days and slept on the roof of the cell I'd been offered, having been driven out of the cell by the mice. Yet this paved the way to my

friendship with Skalzung, whose cell opened out onto the roof where I'd been sleeping. After she invited me to share her morning tea and meals for a few days, we became roommates and I took the role of purchasing food supplies in Padum periodically, to supplement what I could purchase in Karsha. Sleeping on the roof afforded me the nightly pleasure of a darker, deeper sky than I'd ever seen, split by a lustrous Milky Way and punctuated by nightly flashes of distant lightning refracted from monsoon storms taking place hundreds of kilometers south, in the first ranges that sprang from the Indian foothills. The Lonpo told me that the intermittent flashes of light were believed to be sparkling jewels guarded by a dragon, whose roar could occasionally be heard as the storms came closer.

While the ethnographic trope of arrival is well worn and invariably humbling, its unique nature has a profound influence on how ethnographers are received in their chosen communities. When I first settled at the nunnery, neither the nuns nor I were clear that the arrangement would last more than a few weeks. In retrospect, either side could have terminated the arrangement at any point without much loss of face. It was important that I humble myself to the assembly and be prepared to perform the multitude of menial tasks that any apprentice nun would be required to perform. Slowly the nuns gained some idea of what I'd be doing as I observed the daily routine at the nunnery, which was hardly as onerous or as rigid as I'd first expected. Over the next months and years, we eased our way into a friendship, both professional and personal.

Because I visited the region each year for fourteen years, my relationship with individual nuns and the villagers evolved from rather naive trust to a more complex relationship of dependency, appreciation, and respect. My early foibles and our mutual vulnerabilities have become a cause of laughter rather than chagrin with the mellowing of time. As an unmarried student, I had more in common with a group of studious nuns than with my agramates in the village, most of whom were married and mothers several times over. By living at the nunnery rather than in a village household, I had access to dozens of households which held close relatives of the nuns. In embracing the postmodern multi-sited approach, I have tried to spend time in all nine of Zangskar's nunneries and travel throughout the remote valleys and the most urban and touristed settings. Between 1991 and 2001 I spent a total of thirty-nine months in Zangskar and Ladakh, which included three winters in Zangskar and three precarious trips down the frozen Chadar gorge. As nuns, monks, and villagers observed me over

the year and judge how well I deported myself with respect to their village rules and local culture, they became less taciturn and more willing to talk freely about their personal situations. While I have no illusion that my ethnography has helped the nuns very much, I have had the opportunity to raise funds for Karsha and Zangskar's other nunneries for the last decade. In this regard, my fieldwork has diverged from the more common tendency of ethnographers to immerse themselves in a fieldsite or sites for a single stretch of time.

All of the events described herein were discussed publicly, although almost none have been recorded in writing. Although I have changed some names and places to protect the individuals concerned, in many cases I have left names intact to preserve individual histories.

All of my interviews were conducted in Zangskari, a west-Tibetan dialect that I learned in the field after studying classical Tibetan for two years at Harvard. Most Zangskari laypeople and monastics speak only Zangskari and perhaps a bit of Urdu if they have a government job, or classical Tibetan if they have spent time in the Tibetan monastic education system. The Buddha urged his disciples to teach in their local languages rather than in the elitist, classical languages of Pali and Sanskrit. In this vein, I have pared down the use of local Zangskari vernacular and avoided excessive use of classical terms to make this account more widely accessible. I have used the standard Tibetan orthography and the standard Wylie system of transliteration.

My greatest debt of all is to the Karsha nuns, who blessed me with their surprising compassion, unflagging patience, and amazing humor even at moments of utmost exhaustion. They taught me lessons I will never forget but will continue to learn from and practice. Deepest thanks to my girlfriends and agetates at the nunnery over the years—Skalzung Lhamo, Garkyid, Skalzung Drolma, Dechen Angmo, Lobsang Angmo, Nyima, Palkyid, and Skalzung Tsomo—for their constant humor and kindness. I will never forget the amazing grace and wisdom of my grandmothers, Abbi Yeshe, Abbi She She, Abbi Lobsang Drolma, and Abbi Norbu, while my adopted tutors and aunties at the nunnery—Ani Putid and Ani Tsering Drolma—fed me and watched over me as carefully as they had their own apprentices. I also thank the nuns of Zangla, Pishu, Tungri, Dorje Dzong, Skyagam, Stagrimo, Shun, Satak, and Sani, who shared countless cups of tea, meals, and stories which helped broaden my perspective on Zangskari nuns. The Karsha Lonpo was the ideal Tibetan teacher, who offered oral

instruction on Tibetan history, Tibetan medicine, and Tibetan astrology. An extremely erudite monk and a teacher by profession, he combined Tibetan oral transmission with the Socratic method in pointing me toward further avenues of study.

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## Gendering Monasticism

The annual springtime ritual of transferring merit to the ancestors was winding down in a village located in the Zangskar region of the Indian Himalaya. Most of the villagers had turned out to participate in a rite which would benefit their ancestors in whatever rebirths they might inhabit. While assemblies of monks and nuns chanted Buddhist prayers of blessing (*smon lam*), the abbot and senior ritual officiants of the local monastery performed Tantric mediations. The monks had collected a few bone fragments from the nearby ancestral cremation pyres and sprinkled them with sacred water and mustard seeds to purify the body, speech, and mind of the deceased, individually and collectively. The bones were then pulverized and mixed with silt and water to make a clay which was packed into tiny molds in the shape of a funeral reliquary or stupa. These figurines (*tsha tsha*) were then carried up to a distant spot on the hillside as a precaution against inadvertent human defilement, where they would sit until they dissolved back into the elements from which they had emerged. Under the direction of a few monks, the village headman and his assistants mixed barley dough, water, barley beer, and unrefined cane sugar into a dough. They shaped the unwieldy paste into a triple-tiered communal offering cake which resembled a large sand castle in taste as much as touch. After every man, woman, and child had received a crumbled allotment of the blessed cake (*tshogs*), the adults began to decant the barley beer into a motley collection of serving vessels from a huge vat on the perimeter of the ritual grounds. By the time the gibbous moon finally rose late in the night, the villagers had been replenishing each other's cups for some time and the talk had become boisterous. Eventually makeshift drums—metal jerry cans sold as army surplus and now empty of barley

beer—were hauled out. Some girls began to beat out a ragged rhythm of local songs while several men dragged the youngest and boldest men out to dance.

Known locally as “virtuous offering” (*dge tsha*), the ritual provides villagers with a Buddhist memorial for their ancestors. It serves as a spring-time communion for past and present members of the village as much as a reminder of Buddhist bonds of *karma* and interdependence. It is also considered to purify the village fields after dark winter months rife with bitter and destructive energies. As with any act of Buddhist generosity, the making of offerings and chanting of blessings with no thought of selfish gain produce merit, the symbolic effect of virtue. In accordance with the Mahayana doctrine of universal compassion, this merit can be dedicated to any and all suffering sentient beings, both absent and present. Yet like many Buddhist rites, there are pragmatic means to ensure that some of this merit reaches a more specific destination. Every villager who makes a ritual donation can submit the names of several ancestors, who are named in the course of the rite. The clay reliquaries stand for the ancestors, individual and collective, who will benefit from the rite. Like most public festivals, the villagewide ancestor rite does not emerge *ex nihilo*. It is produced by a lengthy choreography of reciprocities which require merit and material exchanges. The competitive nature of this giving process reinscribes the very logic of difference that Buddhist doctrine seeks to transcend.

The ritual reproduces an ideology of merit and difference. In this ideology, social difference implies moral difference. Those at the top of the system—the monks—are assumed to be benefiting from prior virtue. Their virtue or merit has enabled them to acquire the status of monk and the Tantric power sufficient to purify and transfer merit to the ancestors. These actions are critical, because future rebirths depend largely on the amount of merit and demerit an individual has accumulated. In the local calculus of rebirths, a male human body ranks highest. Being born in one of the heavens such as the western Buddhist paradise (*nub lde ba can*) is almost as desirable. Some monks joked that my life in America—all bliss and not much merit—was just such a paradise. Yet like the gods who are bound to fall from their indolent paradise once they have exhausted their merit, I too would face an uncomfortable shock in my next rebirth if I failed to make merit in this one. They implied that—unlike the gods, who have little chance to make merit—I could make enough merit to secure a male rebirth through generous donations to the monastery. When I told people I

hoped to be reborn as a woman, and ideally become a nun rather than a monk, they laughed in disbelief. The most senior nun at Karsha nunnery, Ani Yeshe, could not understand my desire to be a female teacher in my next life. She said it would be far more desirable to be reborn as a monk, or a recognized reincarnation known as a Tulku (*sprul sku*) “on a little throne.” Nobody in this region, male or female, had ever expressed a wish to be reborn as a female.

While the villagers danced, drank, and flirted under the light of the stars and moon, the assemblies of monks and nuns each withdrew to a separate house for their obligatory feasts. The nuns were weary and hungry after chanting ritual prayers of blessing all day in the hot sun. Yet they recognized the privilege of being invited en masse to a ritual feast. They would be served a scrumptious meal of rich foods bought through the generosity of those who had made merit with donations. The nuns filed into the empty guest room and sat down cross-legged on the symmetrical rows of rugs arranged around the border of the room. Almost without thinking, they arranged themselves according to the habitual monastic seating order they maintain during most formal or public proceedings. Abbi Yeshe, the eldest, seniormost, and founding member of the nunnery, took the highest spot and the other nuns filed into their places, shifting easily to accommodate a nun above or below as needed. Each nun took out her wooden bowl from inside the folds of her upper robe. Like the texture and style of her robes, her bowl’s unique color or design instantly signaled the status and identity of its owner. Abbi Yeshe pulled out the dark bowl of Bhutanese teak she had brought back from Tibet decades earlier.

After some time, the hostess arrived with a flask of steaming butter tea. She began by filling Yeshe’s cup at the “head” of the seating order. She poured the tea with her right hand, holding her left hand outstretched with palm upturned in the customary gesture of politeness for offerings made to a higher-status person. As a laywoman, she held these village nuns in particular esteem. They had chosen an ascetic life to which she had once aspired, but to which she was now resigned to send her daughter or perhaps a granddaughter. The nuns asked about their host’s experience in managing the festival this year. Had the donors been stingy or generous? The ritual expenses more or less than expected? Having just completed their elaborate three-week Great Prayer Festival, the nuns were attuned to the pitfalls of ritual fund-raising. Each year, turn by turn, one nun was chosen to solicit donations from throughout Zangskar for the nuns’ festi-

val. As in the past, this year's steward had outdone herself in providing her community with lavish meals prepared by the two junior monks hired as cooks. One of these young monks-cum-cooks, Tashi, popped his face into the room.

Yeshe jumped off her pillow to offer her seat to young Tashi, whose rakish baseball cap still bore streaks of flour from his duties as nunnery cook. The lengths to which Yeshe went to place herself below Tashi seemed almost absurd. As he moved without hesitation to the head of the row, Yeshe hastily shifted down the row, so that they would not share the same rug. He placed his wooden cup next to hers, but she quickly reached to move her cup off the table they now shared. Temporarily stymied, as there was no other table within reach, Yeshe found a small block of wood and elevated Tashi's cup triumphantly. Everyone laughed at this exaggerated and seemingly ironic display of deference, yet nobody questioned it, least of all Tashi. When the hostess brought the food, Tashi was served first, and none of the nuns took a bite of food until Tashi did. Yeshe had been ordained by the head of the Dalai Lama's own Gelugpa sect in Tibet before founding Karsha nunnery and serving as its chantmaster and CEO for many years. Yet she subordinated herself to a callow teenager without a second thought. In my eyes, Buddhist hierarchy was made concrete even as it was caricatured.

Although it takes time to understand all of the practices that systematically discriminate between nuns and monks, their effects are visible every day. Unlike more ambiguous village seating orders, monastic seating arrangements are relatively fixed. Village seating orders are governed by four set principles, usually, but not always, administered in descending order: monastic over lay, male over female, high caste over low, and age over youth. By contrast, monastic seating orders are governed by two major rules with clear precedence: first, male over female, and only second, by seniority or office. When not fulfilling a monastic office, every monk or nun has a set place in his or her assembly. Monastics sit above those who have joined the assembly later and below those who have joined previously. However, the entire assembly of monks presides over the assembly of nuns. In this calculus, any monk outranks any nun, regardless of seniority or office.

The rule placing monks above nuns is said to date back to the Buddha himself. Yet its validity comes from centuries of repeated subordination as much as from the Vinaya or canonical monastic discipline where this rule

is stated. Although the Buddha admitted that women can gain enlightenment just as men can, he only accepted women into his monastic order on one caveat. He specified that all nuns be subject to the authority of monks by the “eight heavy precepts” (*lci ba’i chos brgyad, garudharma*). The first and foremost of these eight rules dictates that a nun who has been ordained a hundred years must bow down to a monk ordained for only a day. This stricture was the only one of the eight that the Buddha’s aunt rejected, albeit to no avail. These rules gave monks the right to discipline and admonish nuns, while forbidding nuns from doing the same to monks. Ever since, female ordination has presupposed a necessary if not willing subordination. Some feminist nuns may balk at being seated below monks, and scholars may debate the historical legitimacy of these rules. Yet none have been able to undo their desired effect. That Buddhist monks gained more power and prestige than nuns across Asia is well known. Yet the role of merit, purity, and ordination in sustaining this dominance has been insufficiently understood.

A Tibetan proverb tells us:

In enlightened thought there is no male and female  
In enlightened speech there is no near and far.

This saying suggests that the distinction between male and female is as much an anathema to enlightened thought as the distinction made between those near to and far from one’s heart. In other words, all beings have equal potential for Buddhahood, regardless of whether they are male or female, friend or foe. Doctrinally, gender is a relative truth which must be ultimately abandoned as an illusion on the path to enlightenment. Yet practice finds it to be an inescapable obstacle. The Buddhist practices considered in this book create the very forms of social difference which doctrine ultimately denies. But how has this tendency to hierarchy been so consistently misrecognized?

The nuns’ eye view of Buddhism offers a perspective on monasticism from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Because the nuns’ viewpoint privileges popular practices and local informants over classical doctrine and textual expertise, it is often either ignored or denigrated. When I first came to study Buddhism in the Zangskar region of Indian Jammu and Kashmir, villagers could not understand why I was at the nunnery and not at the monastery. Like scholars, the laypeople assumed that the study of Buddhist monasticism could best be pursued at its preeminent

institution, the male monastery. By situating myself at the nunnery to see what the nuns' lives entailed, I saw a little-known side of Buddhist monasticism. As my sojourn with the nuns extended from months into years, I became increasingly aware of how different and yet interdependent the nuns' and monks' lives were. Pursuing a dialogical strategy in which informants' concerns advance the research agenda as much as my own, I found my notebooks soon filled with the economic organization of rituals rather than the Buddhist concept denoted by such rituals. Both monks and nuns were more concerned with donor lists and dung collection than with doctrinal debates. Tantric rites were more likely to be fueled by a quest for purity and prosperity than for enlightenment. Merit or virtue was more likely to be measured in terms of butter and barley than in terms of meditation or motivation. The emphasis on material organization led me to theorize that ritual was work which required strategic manipulation of social resources, as much as devotion or symbolic mediation.

Indeed, Buddhist asceticism is premised on reciprocity and sociality as much as on renunciation and individuality. Buddhist monastics are hardly secluded or uninvolved in local socioeconomic relations, except in times of ritual retreat. Many nuns and monks have little time for solitary meditation, given the pressing demands of their clients, the laypeople. In Zangskar, both monks and nuns strategize to maximize both merit and material rewards in serving the laity. Yet their roles within the economy of merit differ vastly. Monks perform rituals and ceremonies through which they have secured a vast endowment from the laity. The monastic enterprise is based as much on the management of property and wealth as on ritual performance and meditation. By contrast, nunneries have little or no endowment and their members are rarely called to perform public or household rituals. Defined as ritually inferior and impure, nuns choose the monastic life to make merit, but lack the ritual means for subsistence. As a result they must make selfless sacrifices for their families, with little time for advanced study. As dutiful daughters, they work on family farms short of labor. As sacrosanct celibates, they must prove their piety and willingness to work for the laity and monks. As subordinate sisters, they serve the monks in many realms, both personal and political. Buddhist monasticism is structured around the same division of labor and dualities of sex that lay communities are.

Buddhist asceticism reflects the society it was supposed to renounce. While nunneries in Zangskar provide a relative degree of autonomy, they

impose their own form of servility. Prospective nuns submit to monks at nearly every stage in the ritual process of renunciation, from first tonsure to final expulsion from the nunnery. Nuns who commit to lifelong celibacy may reject the social mandate of marriage. Yet they cannot transcend the social “traffic” in women, as their parents earn merit and the promise of service in exchange for sending a daughter to the nunnery. Nuns reject the high status that marriage and motherhood offer, but they cannot avoid the burden of gender roles. Their shorn heads and androgynous robes signal a lofty intent to renounce sexuality and maternity. Yet their ascetic discipline cannot absolve them from the dangers and defilement of the female body. Although women were accepted into the monastic order by the Buddha, they have faced obstacles and constraints from the start. Their subordination within the monastic order prevents them from reaching the highest status or attainments.

Buddhist practices of merit making, purification, and ordination have reinstated the very social hierarchies that the Buddha disdained. Merit was intended as an inexhaustible symbol of virtue accessible to all regardless of status. In practice, it functions as symbolic capital in an ideology where prosperity is equated with virtue. Purification rituals were scorned as anathema by a doctrine which declared that no one can purify another. Yet Buddhist monks have amassed enormous endowments through their wide spectrum of expiatory and purificatory rites which guarantee the health and prosperity of persons, houses, villages, and space. The nuns’ order was instituted so that women might seek merit and enlightenment rather than serve monks or their families. Yet South Asian nuns have been systematically subordinated by the loss of full ordination and the monks’ refusal to reinstate this privilege.

The power and prestige of monks rest on a willing and knowing supplication on the part of nuns. This blindness of practice explains why nuns accept and reproduce the conditions of their inferiority. While nuns may misrecognize the effects of their deference towards monks, their stance is hardly unconscious. Both laypeople and nuns consciously pursue merit and purification in order to achieve a better rebirth. The practice theory advocated by a number of anthropologists may help elucidate the habitus of merit making that reproduce social hierarchy. Yet the theory does not tell us enough about the nuns’ agency or their strategic subversions of existing hierarchies.<sup>1</sup> Nuns may strategically defer to monks in order to

make merit, even as they resist other more powerful forms of subordination. Pragmatic rituals reify and legitimate the religious efficacy of monks, while also providing laypeople with leverage over patronage. Both nuns and monks pursue merit, even as they systematically misrecognize its potential to reify status and power within an ostensibly egalitarian monastic assembly. To paraphrase Bourdieu, ritual practices have a logic of their own which sacrifices the rigor of doctrinal truths.

The anthropology of Buddhism has addressed some of the contradictions between doctrine and practice. Although putatively interested in practice, much of this work betrays a subtle bias toward doctrine. Earlier holistic approaches have tried to classify Buddhist practices into static schemas by isolating enlightenment from more pragmatic goals like merit or prosperity.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, my analysis emphasizes the overlapping nature of these categories. It suggests that merit is an aspect of many Buddhist practices, including the soteriological as much as the pragmatic. Nuns and monks perform a wide range of practices on behalf of the laity, which establish reciprocal ties between the groups. The pragmatic nature of many Buddhist rites gives monks a central role in mundane economic and social affairs.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, the dependency of nuns on their families reduces their power and prestige. The lay and monastic realms are hardly as discontinuous or disjointed as formerly assumed, nor is the male monastery separate from its helpmate, the nunnery. The centrality of monks in political and economic processes is testimony to the enduring patronage that has sustained Buddhist monasticism.

Questions of method have disrupted the anthropology of religion in several ways. While cultural anthropologists investigate the nature of the term *culture*, religious studies scholars fret about the category *religion*.<sup>4</sup> Ethnography has come under attack for perpetuating a mythical objectivity which Donna Haraway (1988: 590) once called the “god trick of seeing everywhere from nowhere.” Simultaneously, religious studies scholars have destabilized the “god trick” of the category religion itself as well as the crypto-theology conducted in the name of religious studies. The post-colonial efforts to remove lingering stains of orientalism and positivism in both fields unmask religion and culture as disciplinary categories and social formations of considerable import. Yet the methodological critiques are not without their own problems. In ritual studies, the unilateral focus on domination or resistance undermines subjectivity and agency as much as symbolic or interpretive approaches tended to ignore power and class.<sup>5</sup>

Although the irreducibility of categories like ritual, religion, and culture has come under attack, it is not yet clear what new terms will replace them. In the anthropology of religion, postmodern debates over method and discourse have exposed master narratives as outmoded, while still trying to avoid the fallacy of substituting other, equally problematic narratives of decline or progress in their place.

These critical perspectives have investigated the links between Buddhist studies, orientalism, and colonialism. Colonialism was implicated in the race for knowledge and power in Kashmir as in Tibet. The first translation of Buddhist texts brought back by colonial officers or lay Protestant missionaries reflected classic orientalist concerns. To paraphrase Don Lopez, the translators took charge of representing Oriental beliefs because they believed the Orient to be incapable of representing itself.<sup>6</sup> Where possible, classical texts were preferred to modern informants, who were regarded as ignorant or mistaken. Painting a picture of historical decline and corruption, Victorian scholars displayed a consistent preference for classical or Theravada Buddhism over later forms such as Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism. The “primitive” and pristine Buddhism found in Pali texts was hailed as a triumph of Protestant reason and restraint, in contrast to the more idolatrous and ritualized practices of Tantric and Tibetan Buddhism. Yet Western scholars alone are not to blame. Many Tibetan scholars also emphasize the trope of historical decline and the centrality of Buddhist textual knowledge disseminated by a monastic elite.

Some modern scholars still essentialize Tibetan Buddhism as baldly as the Victorians once reified what they called “Lamaism.” The tendency to read Tibetan texts for clues about actual historical practices has hardly destabilized texts from the center of such analysis. This is partly due to the difficulty of doing ethnography in Tibet and the Indian and Nepalese Himalayas for the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Largely secluded from researchers up through 1959, Tibet became even less accessible after the Chinese takeover and subsequent Cultural Revolution. With the flight of the Dalai Lama and other religious elites into exile after 1959 and the closure of Tibet’s borders, scholars were left in the awkward predicament of studying Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, an entire religious economy was systematically dismantled in Tibet, as thousands of temples were destroyed. Given the persistent Marxist critique emanating from China, many scholars were hesitant to study the social or economic relations of Tibetan monasticism.<sup>7</sup>

A lengthy debate about the definition of Tibetan peasants as serfs underscores the political axes which were being ground. At the same time, a salvage mentality drove some Buddhist scholars who translated Tibetan works whose Sanskrit originals had been lost since the Muslim destruction of Buddhist libraries in North India in the twelfth century. The dearth of historical sources in both India and Tibet helped propagate a textual exegesis which emphasized internal literary meanings over social or historical context.

The sociological study of Buddhist practices lags far behind. Recent scholarship still privileges textual analysis over the ethnography of ritual practices even while attempting to overcome the classic bias toward texts. A literary hermeneutic still dominates much of recent Buddhist scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Even the scholarship dedicated to practice has omitted ethnographic description of rites in favor of liturgical and literary translations, often devoid of in-depth social or economic context. Although diaspora studies have come to the foreground, the imaginary but vanished “traditional” Tibet still holds pride of place. The actual social and economic relations which continue to produce ritual practices in exile are occasionally noted, but insufficiently theorized. The reinvention and reconstruction of relations of patronage and tradition are exciting new areas of study. This revival of Tibetan culture, however, has both nurtured and been fed by utopian or romantic imaginings of Tibet as Shangri La.<sup>9</sup> While some critics may argue that these images have little to do with Buddhist practices in Tibet, others recognize Tibetan agency in fostering this myth-making process. Tibetans in exile consciously choose to sell Buddhism as a chicken soup for the alienated Western soul in order to advance any number of political agendas.

The spotlight on Tibet tends to overshadow the regional variants of Tibetan Buddhism such as that found in Himalayan Jammu and Kashmir. Modern scholars have overlooked the continuing presence of Buddhism in Mughal India by ignoring the fact that Zangskar and Ladakh were both suzerain to the Mughal empire.<sup>10</sup> This book restores the centrality of these peripheral kingdoms to the history of Buddhism in India. Himalayan Buddhism is often regarded as a corrupted or less authentic version of a vanished template that once existed inside Tibet. Alternatively, the Buddhism of the Himalayas is seen as more shamanic and less civilized than Buddhist India.<sup>11</sup> In either case, Himalayan Buddhism is studied through the lens of exemplary Buddhist paradigms, a view Edward Said has soundly attacked.

The misrepresentation of Himalayan Buddhism as an untamed cousin of Tibetan Buddhism can be corrected by shifting the terms periphery and center. By situating itself among the nuns of Himalayan Kashmir, this ethnography radically reverses previous foci. The emphases on local and vernacular practices at the nunnery take precedence over classical and textual knowledges at the monastery.

Until recently, nuns were deemed largely irrelevant to the story of Buddhist civilization in Tibet or the Himalayas. The scant references to nuns in local Zangskari or Ladakhi sources merely hint at the presence or absence of nuns in any era. Just as a single potshard hardly signifies a community with a single pot, a single reference to nuns in the eleventh century does not imply a community of one. Clearly further research is needed before confirming the role of nuns in Himalayan Kashmir. Zangskari histories record a landscape conceptualized as demonic and female being subdued by male adepts. These phallic metaphors record the Buddhist conquest through the male and monastic eyes. Where are the nuns or female adepts in this process? The exclusion of nuns from modern Buddhist scholarship is due to oversight as much as to oblivion.<sup>12</sup> Travel literature from the British Raj omits nuns in a territory catalogued so exhaustively in other ways. This may be due to the Victorian bias against insolent informants as much as to a Pali text vision of what nuns should look like. The textual bias persists as scholars continue to ignore ordained nuns who work in the fields or don't always wear monastic robes. Other scholars have mistaken ordained nuns for lay renunciants, as both are called *jomo* (*jo mo*) in the local vernacular. This confusion overlooks the fact that local informants clearly distinguish the difference between the two groups. While ordained novices are part of a monastic assembly and perform public rituals, elderly renunciants have no formal ritual roles or assembly. Yet even local idiom can perpetuate the elision of nuns, when it fails to recognize that nunneries are also solitary places or *dgon pa*, the generic Tibetan term for a monastic residence.<sup>13</sup>

When not neglected or degraded, Buddhist nuns are discounted as lesser monastics. It is still assumed that nuns have less valid motivations than monks do. The popular assumption that nuns are women unable to find or keep a husband hardly reflects the current generation of nuns across the Himalayas.<sup>14</sup> Not a single nun out of the more than one hundred nuns I interviewed in Zangskar over the last decade was divorced or a single mother. Only one had been a widow. While some remote Himalayan nunneries may house widows or divorced women, many of the rural and urban nun-

neries across the Himalayas from Kashmir to Bhutan are filled with young women who join the nunnery long before they come of marriageable age. Nuns are as likely as monks to spend their youths in celibate apprenticeship before seeking lifelong ordination in the Tibetan tradition. The poverty and hardship nuns endure imply a motivation which matches or exceeds that of monks.

The systematic elision of women's experience and agency in the study of Buddhist monasticism requires an analysis that does far more than just "add women and stir."<sup>15</sup> The history and practice of monasticism must be rewritten to include both nuns and monks. Taking women seriously as an analytic category means far more than adding a few nuns into the historic record. It requires reanalyzing the historic record and the central role of Buddhist practices that have excluded or subordinated women. This book's analysis of merit making, ordination, and purification practices fulfills only a part of this agenda. This work interrogates the simplistic assumption that nuns are lesser monks by arguing that gender and sexuality are inescapable aspects of monastic life. It also explores why monks and nuns have such different social and economic power. In this regard, it moves away from previous monographs on nuns which tended to isolate nuns from lay society or from monks and argues that it is impossible to study the status of nuns without considering their relations to monks and the laity.<sup>16</sup> In Zangskar, nuns and monks pursue reciprocal engagements with one another as much as with lay villagers. The social status of nuns emerges through such reciprocities and obligations to both sacred and profane realms. Their subordination is reinforced in both ritual and mundane settings. The study of Buddhist practices reveals what doctrinal discourse on gender and enlightenment have occluded.

Donna Haraway notes that "passionate detachment"

requires more than acknowledged and self-critical partiality. We are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view which can never be known in advance, which promise something extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination.<sup>17</sup>

I use passionate detachment as a metaphor for a perspective which combines a passionate feminism with Buddhist detachment. In situating itself firmly at the nunnery, this ethnography assumes the Buddha's prover-

bial middle way between feminist and Buddhist perspectives. It accepts poststructuralist feminist perspectives as well as Buddhist perspectives on interdependence, indeterminacy, and subjectivity. The evidence of experience suggests that nuns have a “different voice” in Buddhist society. Taken alone, their perspective is as partial or incomplete as the more normative view of Buddhism that only referenced monks. By switching the focus from monks to nuns, this book unveils the assumption that the monks’ perspective is unmediated or objective. Most important, the description from the nunnery can yield startling insights into how Buddhist practices have perpetuated social difference.

Buddhist literature has produced a range of discourses about the relationship between sex and enlightenment. A single question—is it possible to achieve enlightenment in the female body—has elicited variable responses in almost every era. Yet Buddhist practices like monastic endowments and merit making have perpetuated a consistent preference for monks over nuns. The ideologies of merit and purity have prevented nunneries from earning as much patronage as monasteries have. The ritual practices which produce merit and purity illustrate the sheer impossibility of transcending difference and rank. Doctrine may view duality as conventional and ultimately illusory; practice knows it to be real and necessary. Many Buddhist practices reproduce an implicit hierarchy between nature and culture, female and male, and profane and sacred. While the female body signifies defilement and constraint, the male body suggests purity and potential. Ritual practices reinstate the subordination or subdual of female nature. These discourses both authorize and undo Buddhist institutions. Buddhist monasticism is founded and founders within an ideology that contains the seeds of its own contradiction.

In the Buddha’s words, enlightenment is achieved by the cessation of desire. Like a doctor treating a patient, the Buddha explained the cause, cure, and treatment of a universal disease he identified as suffering. The ethical treatment for this suffering prescribes a path of three trainings—morality, meditation, and wisdom—which form the basis of the three vows (*sdom gsum*) that Tibetan Buddhists are supposed to adopt: individual liberation (*pratimoksa*), universal liberation (*bodhisattva*), and esoteric liberation (*tantra*).<sup>18</sup> The accumulation of virtue (*dge ba*) or merit (*bsod nams*) is central to the practice of morality. Although Tibetan Buddhism has broadened or relativized the definition of this path, it has hardly discarded merit

or purity as an ethical foundation.<sup>19</sup> Most Tantric ritual includes a standard Mahayana dedication of any merit to all sentient beings. The standard Tantric liturgy (*sadhana*) evinces a clear commitment to purity and merit, as two of its seven stages (*yan lag bdun*) focus on purification and the dedication of merit.<sup>20</sup> The ideal Mahayana figure who perfected merit, purity, and compassion was known as *bodhisattva* in Sanskrit or the “hero [with] a perfectly purified mind” (*byang chub sems dpa*) in Tibetan. Although this hero could adopt antinomian acts and a radical array of guises in the Tantric tradition, he or she cannot deny ethical causality. Placing others before self, the *bodhisattva* might choose to act in ways that took on the karmic burden of what appeared as misdeeds, but only in the service of reducing the suffering of sentient beings. Even such antinomian acts preserve the primacy of merit because they should be undertaken only to prevent others from harming themselves or others. As such, dualistic notions of right and wrong were transcended while an ethos of nonharming and merit was sustained.<sup>21</sup>

Merit is the effect of virtue in the Buddhist ideology. It is central to the Buddhist theory of morality and agency. The law of *karma*—which literally means action—posits that only intentional acts produce an effect. This allows individuals to author their destiny at every moment, through conscious acts of body, speech, and mind. Because conscious acts have causal consequences, individuals create their present as well as their future reality and rebirth. Every action (*las*) produces and is produced by its fruit or effect (*bras*). These actions produce the effect of merit, demerit, or are ethically neutral. In the Tibetan formulation, the ten virtuous acts (*dge ba bcu*) which produce merit simply comprise abandoning the ten nonvirtuous acts (*mi dge ba bcu*) which produce demerit—namely, killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slander, using harsh words, idle gossip, being covetous, hatred, and wrong views.<sup>22</sup> Since total abstention from nonvirtuous acts is almost impossible, merit making offers a useful antidote to the buildup of demerit.

Tibetan Buddhists engage in constant attempts to build up their store of merit. Yet merit making is hardly confined to what Cicero would recognize as virtue. The wide spectrum of Tibetan merit-making practices range from the most mechanical—circumambulation, repeating mantras, spinning prayer wheels, and raising prayer flags—to the most esoteric—the construction and deconstruction of visible and invisible universes called *mandala*. In addition to three paradigmatic ways of making merit—gener-

osity (*sbyin pa, dana*), morality (*tshul khrims, sila*), and meditation (*bsgom pa, bhavana*)—Tibetan sources add a fourth, the power of blessed substances (*rdzas*).<sup>23</sup> Merit is produced by a range of ritual acts which extend far beyond the standard list of ten virtuous deeds.

In the Theravada ethics, demerit can never be undone, but can be balanced by the merit of positive deeds. In this view, murderers must suffer at least one rebirth in hell for their negative act. Yet Tantra offers a powerful antidote. It supplies purifying practices which wipe out the stain of negative *karma* before it takes effect. The ritual remedies which can eradicate negative *karma* include remorse, receiving teachings, reciting mantras, making images, making offerings, and even hearing the Buddha's words. One Tibetan ethicist, Tsongkhapa, lists almost as many means of getting rid of negative *karma* as there are ways of accumulating it.<sup>24</sup> The Tibetan narrative of the Tantric adept Milarepa suggests that the sin of killing an entire family can be eradicated with Tantric practices that also achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime. Tibetan Buddhist ethics thus retain a fundamental paradox. It emphasizes virtue and merit even as it supplies Tantric practices for eliminating negative *karma* that nonvirtuous acts produce.

Although merit is central to most Tibetan Buddhist ritual, it is not the only factor influencing events. *Karma* is an ultimate cause (*rgyu*) which operates in conjunction with secondary causes (*rkyen*). Unlike merit, which is stored over lifetimes, such secondary causes operate in a more immediate manner within a single lifetime. These contributing causes—like astrology, nature, diet, and demonic influence—may appear independent even as they are subsumed within the law of *karma*.<sup>25</sup> As such, individual merit does not cause or prevent a natural disaster or the “planetary attacks” (*gza'i gnod*) that cause epilepsy, for instance. Yet a stockpile of good fortune (*rlung rta*) or Tantric blessing (*sbyin labs*) can make an individual less susceptible to these forms of harm or disease. Tantric purification and expiation are intended to protect persons from the accidental and relentless negativities in the universe. As merit declines in salience, Tantric blessing and purity rise.

The Buddhist concept of *karma* was intended to offer an ethical alternative to the Hindu theory of *karma* and *dharma*. In Hinduism, *karma*, or ideal action, is adjusted according to individual nature (*svabhava*) as well as the social *dharma* of caste. The Buddha and his followers revised this relationship by insisting that *karma* was generated by volitional action, in-

dependent of caste or gender. Purification was no longer the exclusive realm of the Brahman priests, but an act accessible to each and every individual. The *Dhammapada* argues that no one can purify another, because purification only takes place by the self alone. In theory, an entire religious profession was cast aside in one sweeping phrase. In practice, purification is a central aspect of Buddhist ritual. Internal purification through morality, meditation, and wisdom has never obviated the need for external purification by monastic ritual. Indeed, the agency and authority of Buddhist monks are premised as much on the expiation of impurity and demerit as on their continual recurrence.

The Buddhist ideology of merit sees present status as an index of past virtue. Indeed, happiness or wealth implies previous rectitude and purity while suffering or poverty suggests previous misdeeds.<sup>26</sup> The rank or status of every sentient being is determined by its accumulated storehouse of merit and demerit. The infinite varieties of rebirth are classed into six broad “families of existence” (*gro ba rigs drug*): god, demigod, human, animal, hungry ghost, and hell being. In local idiom, the sum total of all deeds, good and bad, is added up after death by the Lord of Death, Yamantaka, in order to determine the next rebirth. Every rebirth contains an allegorical message, in folk idiom. I was once cautioned before a fasting ritual that falling asleep during the rite could earn me rebirth as a domestic beast forced to work without rest. Alternatively, killing the smallest louse or flea was to risk being reborn as a bug. Excessive desire is said to lead to rebirth as a hungry ghost or “smell eater” (*dri za*). These sorry beings have grossly distended stomachs, signaling endless hunger and thirst, as well as horribly narrow throats through which no food but only smells can pass. Offerings of burnt barley flour (*su ru pa*) and juniper incense (*bsangs*) are said to give such ghosts temporary relief. A thief might be reborn as a pauper, and a generous donor may be reborn as a prince. Yet gender provides one of the most insidious allegories of all.

In Tibetan idiom, women are seven lifetimes behind men. Women must accumulate the merit of seven additional lifetimes before they can be reborn as men.<sup>27</sup> The proverb persists despite a rather dubious logic which begs several questions. If it always takes seven more rebirths, how can any woman ever be reborn as a man? Could excessive virtue propel a woman into a male rebirth in the next rebirth, allowing her to skip the other six rebirths? Why do women categorically have less merit than men if gender is

irrelevant to enlightenment? The question of whether it is possible to gain enlightenment in the female body has plagued authors since the time of the Buddha. While doctrine offers numerous contradictory answers to this question, Buddhist practices are far less ambiguous. Buddhist merit-making practices suggest that women are triply handicapped. Their lesser store of merit from past lives explains not only why they suffer in this life but also why they have fewer opportunities to improve their prospects for the next life. Ritual practices surrounding childbirth and fertility of house and field specify the female body as inferior or impure. Household and village rites of expiation and purification reinforce a gender hierarchy in which the female is defective or inferior.

The bottom line is clear. No Buddhist in her right mind desires a female body. The fifteenth-century Tibetan ethicist Tsongkhapa offers a teaching which indexes sex, race, and family according to moral virtue. His chapter on *karma* explains that a body with sufficient virtue will be easily recognized as being of “consummate color” and “consummate lineage” and consummate gender or male.<sup>28</sup> The implicit sexism and racism of this Tibetan perspective on merit have been studiously overlooked thus far. Tsongkhapa’s text does not identify which color or lineage signals virtue, yet it unambiguously finds the male body to signal virtue. Male bodies are rewards for past merit or virtue; female bodies are to be reviled and rejected. Many of my informants in Zangskar repeated this view when they expressed the wish to be reborn as a male. Villagers make merit by donating to monks in the hope of being reborn as males or monks at the top of the social hierarchy. Most laypeople seem uninterested in deconstructing a system of patronage from which they hope to benefit one day.

While all Buddhists need merit, there are many different ways to earn it. In local idiom, it takes merit to make merit. In fact, merit and capital are concentrated at the top of a hierarchy which is at once social and moral. The amount of merit produced by a given act of generosity is relative to the amount of merit of the donor and the recipient of any act of generosity. As such monks, who have the most merit, are also the most worthy recipients of gifts. Indeed, the more virtuous the monk, the greater the merit accrued by the donor. Ironically, those monks seen as the most virtuous—like the Dalai Lama—acquire the largest streams of wealth. They are given palaces which they will never inhabit, even as nearby nuns struggle to subsist. The lay donors and monastics caught up in the economy of merit systematically misrecognize this concentration of wealth. Of course, villagers

can and do decide to give to the poor or other worthy recipients.<sup>29</sup> Yet such donations have yet to displace the steady flow of patronage toward the richest monks or monasteries. The Thai monk Buddhadasa once attacked this problem in merit making as follows:

What is called merit or merit making is for those caught up in the world because it tempts people to lose their way in the grasping of the senses. . . . Indeed of all the things that tempt people to be led astray and preoccupied nothing exceeds merit making. Nothing is so destructive of human freedom.<sup>30</sup>

This is a strong condemnation of a central Buddhist practice followed by laypeople and monastics around the world. To unravel the paradox of merit and hierarchy, one must look at Buddhist monasticism from the bottom up and inside out. Wealth is neither necessary nor sufficient for making merit through generosity (*dana*). If the self and its attachments are given away, generosity need not involve wealth at all. Yet such purity of motivations is difficult to attain. Numerous parables imply that a small gift of pure detachment earns more merit than a large gift without the proper motivation. Yet numerous practices index social or economic capital to the symbolic capital of merit. More often, making merit reinforces social hierarchies. While the rich and monks can earn merit by donating or performing elaborate ritual spectacles, the nuns, laywomen, and the poor lack the ritual skills or wealth to earn merit in such prestigious ways. The latter may make merit through mechanical means such as praying, prostrating, circumambulating. Of course, rich men or monks can and do fast, while even the poor can make small ritual donations. Yet there are real constraints within the economy of merit. Nuns lack the ordination status and the training to perform certain rites. In the end, merit making reifies the very forms of social difference that doctrine denies.

Although there is evidence of subversion and evasion, there is less resistance than might be expected in the local economy of merit. Nuns and laypeople might grumble at having to perform chores for the monastery, but they rarely refused. Social critics who were outspoken about government corruption showed little impetus to reform the monastic order. Corrupt or promiscuous monks were defamed in private but tolerated in public. 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. There were few public denunciations such as those

which wracked Buddhists in Boulder or Catholics in Boston more recently. The hegemony of monks, however, is always partial and contingent. The competition for social and symbolic capital seems to be intensifying. In Zangskar and Ladakh, monasteries are hemorrhaging monks, while nunneries are packed to overflowing with new recruits. Although the ratio of nuns to monks continues to rise, it is far too early to tell if the glass ceiling within monasticism will disappear.